Performance In a Leading Role  

by Mad_Lori

Summary

Sherlock Holmes is an Oscar winner in the midst of a career slump. John Watson is an Everyman actor trapped in the rom-com ghetto. When they are cast as a gay couple in a new independent drama, will they surprise each other? Will their on-screen romance make its way into the real world?

Notes

Response to a prompt on the SherlockBBC LJ community: Sherlock is an Oscar-nominated method actor, John is in the usual leading man in rom-coms. They are both experiencing a slump in their careers, and their managers convince them to portray a gay couple in an upcoming film. Sherlock at first looks down at John because of his not so impressive filmography, but they film a certain emotional scene and he is impressed with John's really excellent acting. CAN LOVE BLOOM BEHIND THE CAMERAS?
Chapter 1

If he hadn’t already been keenly aware of it, Sherlock Holmes would have known that his career was sliding slowly into oblivion by the way other people acted toward him as he walked through to his agent’s office. Five years ago, the second he walked in, all eyes would have turned towards him. Shy smiles, blushes, eyelash-batting, big proud grins. Rushes to get him tea, take his coat. That sense of communal success that came from one of their actors doing well. Go, team, go. One of the agency’s clients winning an Oscar was like the entire team winning the World Cup. It brightened everyone’s prospects.

Today, it was all avoidance. When your last picture belly-flopped and the previous one was a critical embarrassment, capping off a string of underperforming films, no one wanted to meet your eyes. He wasn’t bringing in the commissions. His asking price was sinking. The directors weren’t lining up at his agent’s doorstep, begging to give him a script.

The only upside to all this was that the bloody paparazzi were leaving him alone. God, he hated Los Angeles. Not that London was much of an improvement; the tabloids there were even worse. At least there, he knew where he could go and have some peace. The community was tighter. He’d gone to RADA with half of the British film industry. Here, it was every man for himself.

Greg was waiting for him at his assistant’s desk. He smiled and shook his hand. “Sherlock. Come on in.”

Sherlock followed Greg into his understated office. He was one of the most powerful agents in Hollywood, but Greg was calm and efficient. It was one of the reasons Sherlock had chosen him ten years ago, after his first nomination had turned him overnight into a hot commodity. He didn’t need a cheerleader or someone to stroke his ego. He needed a partner, and Greg had been that.

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” Greg said, sitting down. Sherlock did the same. “Which do you want first?”

“I think I already know the nature of the bad news,” Sherlock said.

“I’ve spoken to David. They’re not going to make you an offer.”

Sherlock sighed. “That part is mine, Greg. I would fucking own it. I can already see it in my mind.”

“I don’t disagree. They’re going another way.”

He squinted. “What way are they going?”

Greg hesitated. “Nothing’s been announced, but – I hear they’re going to offer it to Robert.”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open. “Please, tell me you’re joking.”

“I am not.”

“He’s ten years older than me! The character is supposed to be thirty!”

“David knows Robert, they’ve worked together before.”

“The man plays every role as himself!”

“He’s a good actor, Sherlock. And his last two pictures took home tidy profits. And he doesn’t
reduce his directors to hysteric on set.”

Sherlock sniffed. “The very idea that Robert Downey, Jr and I could ever be considered as candidates for the same role is insulting.”

“Don’t get up on your high horse. You still have options. Quentin called again…”

“No.”

“It’s a very interesting part.”

“It’s a small part, is what it is. I will not take one of Quentin’s trademarked rescue-the-has-been supporting roles.”

“He’s saved careers in worse shape than yours, you know.”

“I am not yet in a position to have to go begging to that video store clerk.” He frowned. “Am I?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so.” Greg folded his hands on his desktop. “But it’s getting there, Sherlock. You pay me for honesty, so here it is. The Oscar curse is real.”

Sherlock sniffed. “No, it isn’t. It’s merely a manifestation of regression to the mean. An exceptional result is a statistical outlier, therefore subsequent data points will tend back towards the average, which will give the impression of a decline.”

“However you explain it, you’re not immune. The bloom is off the rose. Kanizsa was five years ago. No one’s forgotten what you’re capable of. You’ve proven it time and again. But the money isn’t there, and that’s the only currency that matters.”

“May I remind you that no one predicted that Kanizsa would achieve the financial success that it did? And that part of the reason it made money was the Oscar bump it got from my performance?”

“I don’t need reminding. I make that very point to directors and producers every day. But recapturing that isn’t easy. And some of your choices since then have been – unorthodox.”

Sherlock sighed. “Go ahead, say it. I told you so.”

“I won’t say that. I’m your agent, you pay me to make deals on your behalf, not to dictate your creative choices. But you’re not making it easy for me.”

“I don’t care about the money. All that matters to me is the work. I just want something interesting, something challenging. If all I cared about was money, I could take period dramas or action-movie-villain roles until I retire, or die of boredom.”

“You just described Alan Rickman’s career. Don’t knock it.”

“Alan has Potter residuals to live on until the end of time. His worries are over. All I care about are roles worth my time and effort.”

“But if your films aren’t making money, you’ll be taking those roles in tiny self-financed independent films and you’ll have to move to Burbank. You can talk about money like it’s not important because you have it. For now. Box office success is directly translatable to artistic freedom. I know you want to help produce scripts you think are interesting. I know you want choices. For that, you need marketability. And yours is bleeding away fast.” Greg took a deep breath. “We cannot afford another disaster like Schrodinger Paradox.”
Sherlock tightened up, his jaw clenching. “That was not my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“The studio butchered that film. Paul damn near lost his mind. The rewrites killed the script.”

“No argument. But the reviews…”

“My performance was the only thing that got positive notice.”

“That wasn’t enough to save the film. It lost two hundred million dollars, Sherlock. And you were supposed to be a draw.”

“I can’t buoy up an entire production! I signed on for a thoughtful speculative piece and the studio decided they wanted a futuristic actioner!”

“Nobody’s blaming you.”

“Nobody’s hiring me, either.”

Silence fell. Finally, Greg sighed. “Well, we’re not done yet. I’ve got a couple of interesting prospects.”

Sherlock braced himself. “All right. Let’s hear them.”

“The first could be a franchise.”

“A franchise? Surely you jest.”

“No. A somewhat atypical one. It’s based on a series of books, the Shadow Unit series. It’s about a team of FBI behavioral analysts who investigate paranormal phenomenon.”

“Sounds ridiculous.”

“Actually it’s quite fascinating. Gritty and noir and intelligent. There’s a fantastic character for you, he’s a bit younger than you, but I think you can play it. He’s the team’s resident genius.”

“How appropriate. Who is directing this *piece de résistance*?”

“Well, hold on to your chair. It’s the Coens.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened. “The Coens are starting a paranormal franchise?”

“It’s pretty much the only genre they haven’t covered.”

“Hmm. I’ll have a look at the books. Is there a script?”

“Not as such. They’re in development.”

Sherlock made a face. “So that’s several years off, if it happens at all.”

“They’re making casting decisions, it can’t be that far off.”

“What’s the other prospect?”

“Well, this is the one I think you should consider the most. I had a call from Ang Lee. He’s very interested in meeting with you about a role in his new film.”
“What’s the film?”

“It’s about a gay couple.”

“Oh, going back to that well, is he?”

“This isn’t Brokeback Part 2. Ang’s very interested in making a film about the life of a gay couple that isn’t a ‘gay film,’” Greg said, making air quotes.

Sherlock frowned. “How do you mean?”

“He doesn’t want the film to be about the traditional gay-film topics. AIDS and homophobia and coming out and religion and family discord. He wants to make the sort of film one might make about any couple, except that this couple is two men. I’ve read the script. I think it’s astonishingly good. Very honest, very stark.”

“I don’t know, Greg. Playing gay is a risk. It shouldn’t be, but it is.”

“Look what it did for Heath Ledger.”

“Unfortunate example. The poor bloke died.”

“Yes, but before that his career was through the roof.”

Sherlock sighed. “Who wrote the script?”

“It’s a first-time screenwriter, Molly Hooper. Apparently she wrote the script with you in mind.”

“Grand. A treatise by a fan.”

“That’s not how it reads.” Greg reached into his desk and pulled out a script. He tossed it across to Sherlock. “Take it home. Read it. Call me when you’re done and we’ll talk.”

Sherlock took the script home to the condo he maintained in Los Angeles for the time he was forced to spend there. He set up camp on his patio with some wine and his laptop and started reading.

Four hours later, he dialed Greg.

“Lestrade.”

“Greg, it’s Sherlock.”

“Well?”

“I must be in this film. I must.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“The title has to be changed, though. ‘Silence and Death?’ Bloody grim. Sounds like a Jim Jarmusch film, and we all know the audiences stampede to those.”

“I’m with you on the title. I believe that’s open for discussion. So, you want me to call Ang?”

“Tell him I’ll read for him if he wants.”

“Oh, you’re condescending to read for a role?”
“For this one, I’ll read.”

“I don’t think you’ll need to. You’re the actor he wants.”

“I don’t care if he pays me scale. I must do this.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you this excited about a part.”

“It’s a fantastic part. I can see where this Hooper woman drew some inspiration from me, but Benjamin is – he’s not me. He’s in a cocoon, and there’s this fantastic cyclical development she’s drawn for him. It’s interesting.”

“I’m glad you’re reacting this way. And I don’t think you’ll have to settle for scale.”

“Have they cast the other role? Who do they want for Mark?”

“I’m not really…”

“Because I have some ideas about that. Oh, I should call Jimmy, he’d love this part – but I think he’s committed to the Wanted sequel. You know who’d be fantastic, is Matt Goode. I did an episode of Buzzcocks with him once, he’s lovely.”

“Sherlock.”

“What?”

He heard Greg sigh. “I fear you’re not going to like this. There’s been no offer made, but the casting director told me that Ang wants John Watson.”

Sherlock’s stomach dropped. “What?”

John blinked. “Pull the other one.”

Mike grinned. “I’m not having you on, mate.”

“Stop it. Stop it right now.”

“I’m serious! Would I kid you about something like this?”

John grabbed Mike’s lapel, grinning. “Ang Lee wants to talk to me about a part? A part in which I will not have to make googly eyes at a mindless starlet fifteen years younger than me?”

“You heard me correctly.”

“Call him back! Tell him I’ll meet him now, today! Anywhere he wants!”

“Don’t you want to read the script?” Mike said, laughing.

“Oh, does it matter?”

“You’d be playing half of a gay couple.”

“I’d play a transgender serial killer if he asked me to. Is the script good?”

“It’s mind-blowing. This could revolutionize your career, John.”
“Don’t tease me, Mike.”

“You could escape the rom-com ghetto.”

John sat down heavily. “How did I get there in the first place?”

“Well, the first one was actually good. That’s the seductive part. And it made money. And then the offers all went in that direction, and…”

“Before I knew it, I was taking the parts that even McConaughey wouldn’t touch.” John sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “It’d just be nice to act in something real, something with substance, with a co-star I could actually act with, not at.”

“Well, you might just get that. Guess who Ang wants as your co-star?”

“I couldn’t possibly.”

“Sherlock Holmes.”

John’s eyes widened. “Bloody hell.” He sagged. “Well, that’s that, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“A project with Sherlock Holmes attached to it isn’t going to cast me, King of the Date Movie.”

“Don’t be so quick to think so. It’s awhile since Kanizsa, his star’s not shining at brightly as it once did. I don’t think he’s in a position to dictate casting. I mean, did you see The Schrödinger Paradox?”

“Yes. He was the only thing in it worth watching. That disaster had ‘studio interference’ written all over it. I hear that Haggis nearly had a nervous breakdown during the shoot.” John sighed. “Damn. The chance to act with Sherlock Holmes. Pinch me, will you?”

“I’m going to call Ang and set up a meeting. He’ll want you and Holmes to screen test together. The two of you will have to carry this entire movie and it will live or die on the strength of the chemistry between you, so he’ll have to make sure it’s there.”

“Email me the script, I’ll read it tonight. But if it’s as good as you say, you can tell Ang I’ll work for free coffee and a donut.”

“I can’t believe I agreed to this,” Sherlock muttered, rolling and unrolling the script in his hands.

“Shut your face,” Sally snapped, handing him his tea. “You’ve got to play this part.”

“If they cast this buffoon, the movie’s sunk. All this potential? All this brilliance in these pages? John Watson will piss all over it with ham-handed acting and obvious choices. This calls for subtlety, not the dramatic stylings of a man accustomed to trading so-called adorable banter with the starlet du jour.”

“He did some really interesting character work when he started out, you know.”

“And how long has it been since he’s been asked to do anything more challenging than a Meet Cute?”

“He’s an actor, just like you.”
“He’s a generic boy-next-door, the die-cast Unthreatening Male. I need a co-star with a bit more edge to him. Give me something to act against! He’s a bloody blank white wall!”

Sally sighed. “And you wonder how you acquired a reputation for being difficult to work with.”

“I am difficult. All the great ones are.”

“Point and match, I think.”

“This script requires heavy lifting. There is a scene in which Mark discovers his twin brother’s body after he’s committed suicide! That isn’t material for a man whose films have soundtracks with Top 40 hits on them!”

“You’re just nervous because you’re going to have to film love scenes with him.”

“I’m a professional. I can handle it. I’ve done love scenes before.”

“Not with another man, you haven’t. Here, give me your coat, you know you get sweaty before a screen test. Do you want to look all red-faced on camera?”

“What would I do without you?”

“You’d never find another PA, that’s for sure. Being your assistant ought to qualify me for the diplomatic corps.”

“So, have you ever met him? Watson, I mean? Perhaps when you worked for that dreadful publicist?”

“I met him once, at the SAG awards. He’s very nice.”

“Nice. How delightful,” Sherlock said. He squared his shoulders as they approached the production office. “All right, game faces on.”

They were shown into an office which had been set up for the screen test. “Hello, Jim,” said Sherlock, shaking hands with the producer, Jim Schamus. He looked around. “Ang isn’t joining us today?”

“He’s on a location scout. We’re going to livestream the footage to him.”

“I see,” said Sherlock, irritated. He would have vastly preferred to have the director present. “You’ve met my assistant, Sally Donovan.”

“Yes, hello, Sally,” said Schamus.

“Jim, is Ang really serious about John Watson?” Sherlock asked, seizing the chance while they were alone. “For this material? We might as well cast that Timberlake chap.”

Jim chuckled. “You know, nobody thought that Jim Carrey could handle Eternal Sunshine either, when we cast him. Nobody thought Michelle Williams was right for Brokeback.” He winked. “Trust me, Sherlock. Our casting directors know what they’re doing.”

Sherlock had his doubts about that, but he didn’t have time to object further. The door opened again and in strode John Watson, smiling and flushed with excitement. He was trailed by a woman, obviously a relative, who seemed to be his PA.

“Ah, John. Lovely to see you,” said Schamus, shaking Watson’s hand.
“Jim, hello. Good to meet you in person, finally. This is my sister Harry, she’s my PA.” Schamus shook Harry’s hand. Watson turned and looked up at Sherlock. Way up. The man was short. “Mr. Holmes!” he said, sticking out his hand.

“Sherlock, please,” he said, keeping his tone no more than cordial. He shook the man’s hand.

“Crikey, you are tall! John Watson, please call me John. It’s fantastic to meet you, I’m a huge fan. I think I’ve seen Rotisserie a dozen times.”

Sherlock couldn’t help but soften a bit, hearing that. Rotisserie was his personal favorite of his own performances, but no one ever mentioned it because it was an obscure art film he’d done early in his career. “Thank you. I’m fond of that film.” Watson smiled eagerly up at him, clearly hoping for a reciprocation of praise for one of his own films, but to Sherlock’s dismay, he could not dredge up the name of a single one of them. “And you, of course – I’m a…fan,” he managed, hoping he sounded convincing.

John’s smile fell a bit. Didn’t look like he was buying it. “Well, I’m very excited about this project.”

“As am I.”

John shuffled a bit. “Well, Jim, shall we get to it?”

“Yes. We’ve got the cameras set up here, double coverage so just go through the scene as naturally as you can.”


“Yes, of course.”

Sherlock sniffed. “I wouldn’t go off book until after the full cast read-through. It’s pointless to commit a preliminary draft to memory.”

“I prefer to work off book. Gives me more room to breathe.” John rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, one direction, then the other. Sherlock set down his tea, rolling his eyes behind John’s back.

He stepped into the camera’s view, script in hand – he did have at least part of the scene committed to memory, but he wasn’t ready to discard the print – and he and John sat down at the table set there as a stand-in for the park bench where Benjamin and Mark meet.

“Whenever you’re ready,” said Schamus.

John had the first line. Sherlock waited, settling into something like Benjamin. This test wouldn’t be about how he’d eventually play Benjamin, but more about how he and John clicked on screen. Sherlock hoped it would be a dismal failure, frankly. He himself had already signed a contract for this film, so it was really John who was testing here. If their interaction wasn’t what Ang wanted, they’d cast someone else as Mark. Sherlock was already imagining other actors he could perform this script with. The possibilities were tantalizing.

And he was still waiting. John was just sitting there.

He was about to say something when abruptly, John’s posture shifted and his shoulders kicked back a notch, and – he was different. Hard to say how, exactly, but he was. He looked up at Sherlock and delivered the first line. It was like a tennis serve, lobbed across the table, and Sherlock found himself volleying it back with his own line. John caught it with a gesture and an uncertain smile, his
character unsure of who he was dealing with, and continued the dialogue.

Sherlock forgot how badly he wanted John to fail. He forgot that he was screen testing with this man. He just sat back and acted the scene. It was easy, like falling into step with a longtime dance partner, like settling into the dip you’ve worn into your mattress. He barely glanced at his script. Some of his lines weren’t exactly on-book, but John ad libbed responses that fit and kept the scene going. Sherlock felt his character shaping, but shaping in tandem.

It was only a three-page scene. It was over in five minutes.

John grinned, the character he’d just put on falling instantly away and leaving him behind. Sherlock blinked. “That was jolly good,” John said. “Great script, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is,” Sherlock said, gathering his self-possession around him. He stood up. “Jim, does Ang want another scene?”

“No, I think that’ll do,” Jim said. “We’ll be in touch.”

John practically leapt to shake Sherlock’s hand again. “It was a real thrill to read with you, Sherlock. I hope we’ll be working together on this project.”

In spite of himself Sherlock found himself hoping so, too. “Quite,” was all he said.

“Must be off. I’ve got press junkets this afternoon,” he said, making a face. Everyone hated press junkets. “I’ll be expected to wax rhapsodic about my co-star, who never got off cue cards the entire shoot, incidentally. Afternoon!” he said, with a wave. And then he was gone.

Schamus was already on the phone. He waved goodbye to Sherlock as he and Sally left the production offices. “I thought that was quite good,” Sally said.

Sherlock snorted. “Please. The man’s a hack. Barely a notch above soap opera acting.”

“You liked him, didn’t you? You’re just saving face, now. What, worried about being out-acted by the Everyman?”

“You are ridiculous. Please go and be elsewhere.”

Sally grinned. “I love it when you get insecure. I get the most delicious turns of phrase.”

They climbed into Sally’s car. “What’s on for this afternoon?” Sherlock asked.

“Afternoon’s free, actually. You’ve got a reception tonight at the Paley Center. What do you want to wear?”

“Oh, I don’t care. Pick something out.”

They’d barely gotten two blocks away before Sherlock’s mobile went off. “Holmes.”

“Jim Schamus here, Sherlock. I thought you’d like to know. Ang loved your screen test. We’re going to sign John to the picture. You’ve got your Mark. We’ll be in touch for pre-production meetings.”

“All right, Jim. Thanks.” He hung up, heaving a weary sigh. “Looks like I’ll be carrying the Everyman hack on my shoulders for this shoot,” he said.

“I wouldn’t count that guy out yet.”
“If he ruins this picture, I will make sure he never works…”

“…in this town again,” Sally finished with him, laughing. “Where have I heard that one before? Oh, that’s right – isn’t that the last thing Lars said to you before he kicked you off his set?”

Sherlock fumed. “And look how that picture did without me. Ridiculous Danish minimalistic masturbatory navel-gazing.”

Sally shook her head. “Maybe what you need is a John Watson to take you down a peg, Sherlock.”

“I don’t need anyone, Sally, least of all you, so mind yourself.”

“I’m not scared of you, you know. And neither was he.” She merged onto the freeway, cranking down her window. “I think I’m going to enjoy this.”
Chapter 2

Key To Meta References (I’ll do this at the end of subsequent chapters but this one’s for chapter 1 because I didn’t think to put it on the actual chapter):

1. The David who cast Robert Downey instead of Sherlock is David Fincher, director of many awesome films including Se7en and Fight Club, who directed RDJ in Zodiac.
2. RADA is the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, a school that turned out many great British actors. Incidentally, Benedict is not one of them, he went to LAMDA, the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts.
3. Quentin is, of course, Quentin Tarantino.
4. The director of Sherlock’s failed film The Schrodinger Paradox was Paul Haggis, director of Crash.
5. Shadow Unit, the material being optioned by the Coen Brothers for a franchise, is a real series of paranormal thriller novels by a group of sci-fi and mystery authors. Google it, it’s fantastic. I have no inside information about film options, I made that part up.
6. Jim Schamus is the CEO of Focus Features, the art-house branch of Universal, and he is Ang Lee’s longtime producing partner. They’ve worked together on all of Lee’s stateside films.
7. The Jimmy that Sherlock considers his costar is meant to be James McAvoy, who is in reality close friends with Benedict Cumberbatch. He is, in fact, committed to a sequel to Wanted.
8. Only one person commented on the character’s names in the script. I came very close to naming those characters Benedict and Martin, but that was a bit too meta even for me so I went with the soundalike names of Benjamin and Mark.

Disclaimer: Any and all Hollywood gossip and dialogue pertaining to or assigned to actual people is entirely of my own invention. Although one does hear things if one pays attention.

Chapter 2

Sherlock was nearly upside down when he heard Sally’s key in the door. She clomped in with her ridiculous shoes and tossed her keys to the table. “Sherlock?”

“I’m in here.”

Footsteps approached. “Who the hell do you think you’re supposed to be, Vincent Cassel?”

“People keep telling me that I ought to be doing this yoga thing. I’m finding it pointless and absurd.”

Sally’s face popped into view as she bent over to look at him. “I think you’re doing it wrong.”

“Nonsense. I found multiple instructional videos online, I am following them precisely.”

“Are your chakras aligned?”

“There are no such thing as chakras.”

“I could get you a real yoga instructor, you know. One phone call and I’d have twenty vying for the job.”

Sherlock righted himself, staggering a bit as all the blood rushed out of his head. “Who on earth would subject themselves to such a practice?”
“It’s very popular.”

“So is ‘Jersey Shore.’ Need I further qualify my opinion?” He went into the kitchen in search of water.

“I’ve got the production schedule for Untitled Film of Gayness.”

“I hope that’s not the new title.”

“No, just a handle of my own devising.”

“Let’s not suggest it to the poor screenwriter, shall we?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Did you know the entire shoot is in Toronto?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Huh. Looks like it’s Canadian camp-out time.”

“I’m sure the studio will provide us with adequate accommodations. How long’s the schedule?”

“One week rehearsals, eight weeks principal.”

“Eight weeks, hmm. Well, I suppose it is a fairly long script.”

“Read-through and rehearsals will be here, three days’ time for production setup, then principal will start.” She hesitated. “I got a call from Harry Watson.”

“Who?”

“John’s PA. You know, John? Your co-star?”

“Ah, yes.”

“She said that John would like to meet up with you in private. Dinner or something. Just to talk about the film, get to know each other, that sort of thing.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Of course he would. He thinks that we have to be best mates to act together, because he’s an amateur face-puller who wants everyone to like him.”

“Some people like being liked!”

“It certainly isn’t necessary for a realistic performance.”

“No, but it is necessary if you want anybody to ever want to work with you, ever again.”

“If you’re good enough, they’ll work with you whether they like you or not.”

“You really are socially tone-deaf, aren’t you? It isn’t just an act, it’s a legitimate malfunction!”

“I have neither the time nor the inclination to change my behavior so as to make others more comfortable. If they are uncomfortable, that is their affair.”

Sally sighed. “I ought to just tape-record you sometime so that when they ask why you’re still single you can just play it back and it’ll clear everything up.”

Sherlock tossed his empty water bottle into the recycling. “Call John’s PA and tell him dinner is
acceptable. Schedule it for me.”

Sally made a note on her PDA. “Are you going to watch the Globes tonight?”

Of course he was. He had his supplies all laid in. His favorite kosher-dill flavored popcorn from the gourmet shop down the street, a case of Orangina and the makings of vodka tonics for the moment when stupid people began winning awards and drinking became necessary. “Eh. I suppose so,” he said to Sally.

“John’s a presenter, you know.”

“Is he?” Sherlock sniffed. “They never ask me to present. I only get an invite if I’m nominated.”

“They don’t ask because the one time you presented, you stood up there like an automaton and read the lines like you had a gun to your head, and made it very clear that you had nothing but contempt for the entire proceeding.”

Sherlock considered this. “Was it really that bad?”

“Please. Boards wish they were that stiff.”

“Hm. Well, the whole thing is tiresome anyway, with the suits and the red carpets and the screaming fans and all the ridiculous arse-kissing.” He shuddered. “I’d rather watch from my living room.”

“Isn’t it funny how you always claim to prefer the option that you’ve gotten stuck with through being a complete prat?” She headed for the door. “I’m off to the dry cleaner’s and then I’ll pick up the revised scripts, okay?” She hesitated. “If you like, I’ll come back and watch the Globes with you.”

He would have liked to say yes, please. Sally was fun watching awards shows. Her snark, usually focused on him, became redirected towards the show in a way he found amusing. He shrugged. “Whatever you like.”

She grinned. “I’ll stop off and get some Tim Tams at the world market.” She was out the door. Sherlock smirked. God, he hated that woman.

Sarah cocked her head. “I don’t like the tie/shirt combination.”

“But – the stylist said…”

She flapped a hand. “Stylists. Stylists can’t stop dressing you like a fifty-year-old stockbroker with two kids and a minivan. You’re young and hip! You do not want this Regis Philbin look.”

“I’m not as young and hip as I used to be.” John frowned. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I was ever hip.”

“The suit’s good, at least.” She whipped the tie off his neck. “Come on, work with me, John. We’re going to be in a thousand photographs together tonight.”

“And they’ll all be asking us when we’re getting engaged or something equally appalling.”

“So we give them the old ‘we’re focusing on our careers’ line, hold hands and walk on by.”

“Did you see Perez Hilton yesterday? Another unidentified source claiming that you’re my beard.”

Sarah laughed, pawing through his rather disorganized pile of ties. “If all these unidentified sources
ever got together they could form an army and take us all down.”

“You’re always my beard. Isn’t that odd? They never report it the other way.”

“You mean the correct way?” She came up, victorious. “A ha! This one. Take off your shirt, that color white’s all wrong.”

John looked down at himself. “There are different colors of white?” He shrugged and took off his jacket, then his shirt, letting Sarah redress him. “Wow. That really is much better. And if even I can see it, it’s got to be.”

She smiled, standing behind him and smoothing the lines of his jacket. “What would you do without me?” She patted his shoulders and sat down to touch up her makeup. “Oh, that’s right. You’d be fending off ambitious starlets right and left.”

He watched her in the mirror. “How’s Anthea?”

Sarah met his eyes in the reflection, sadness pulling at her expression. “Home. By herself.” She sighed. “I will bring her to next year’s red carpets. I swear. This film is going to make me, John. I can’t even tell you.”

“It’s going well?”

“Honestly? It’s a dream. It’s that shoot we all fantasize about and never get. Clint is brilliant. He’s just got this way of speaking and guiding, it’s buoying everyone up. This is the best work I’ve ever done, and I know everyone else would say the same. We’re all making each other cry on a daily basis.”

John grinned. “I’m glad. You might be a nominee on next year’s red carpets.”

“God. Don’t say it. You’ll jinx me.” She stared at herself in the mirror. “It’s my ticket, John. I’ll be able to come out and my career can survive it.”

“I hope so. God, it infuriates me. This business has more poofs than you can have hot dinners thrown at you but nobody acknowledges it. Nobody comes out. I don’t understand it. This town, I swear. At home it wouldn’t be such a cracking great scandal.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re straight.”

“Ish.”

“Ish?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

“Is there an actor alive who’s completely straight? I doubt it. You don’t work in this business with the people who are in it and not jump the fence a few times.”

“This is too interesting a conversation to have right now when we’re already late.” She got up and took his arm. “Come on, you handsome thing. You’ve got a statue to give away.”

Sally had hunkered down on Sherlock’s couch with a plate of nachos and an Orangina. He glumly munched on his kosher dill popcorn and watched his colleagues traipse down the red carpet, being asked who they were wearing and if it was an honor to be nominated.

“Okay,” Sally said. “Are you going to run it down for me, or what? Half the fun – actually, almost all the fun – is listening to you pick everyone apart.”
He sighed. Of course he was, but he wouldn’t let her know that was the fun for him, too. “What do you wish to know?”

“You know! Who’s having an affair? Who’s secretly gay? You can tell by their tan lines or something, right?”

“Who’s having an affair? It’d be quicker to name who isn’t.” He narrowed his eyes, watching the parade of designer clothing. “Oh, dear Lord, she could at least be subtle about it.”

“About what?”

“She’s taken a much-younger lover. Look at her clothes. She’s dressing ten years too young all of a sudden, she is usually very age-appropriate. And she’s got her hand on her husband’s elbow instead of holding his hand.”

“That could mean anything.”

“No, look at her right hand. She’s wearing a ring, a smallish ring, too small for her husband to have given it to her. It’s a less expensive piece than her others. A gift from a less-established paramour with less refined tastes than her or her husband. Rather cheeky of her to wear it in front of him. He probably knows. Works out well for him. I hear he’s shagging his agent.”

Sally sat up straighter. “Look, there’s John! Oh, he looks fantastic!”

Sherlock eyed her. “You think so?”

“Thank God, looks like he ditched that awful stylist who dressed him like her father.”

“Hmm. It is a nice suit. That color combination should not work.”

“It does though.” She was grinning.

“Oh, you fancy him a bit, do you?”

“I think he’s adorable. So does half of America. And you get to shag him, you lucky bastard.”

“There will be no shagging!”

“I’ve read the script! You’re going to have to simulate giving him head, you know.”

“I’m a professional! I’m sure it will be done very – artistically!”

“Sarah looks nice.”

“Who is that, again?”

“Sarah Sawyer. They’ve been dating about a year. She was a bit player but then Clint cast her as the female lead in that suffragette film he’s shooting. The buzz out of that set is amazing. I’ve got a friend who’s the second AD, she says Sawyer is a sure thing for a nomination next year.”

“Well, she needs to reconsider what size gowns she orders. One deep breath and she’ll be showing us her bits.”

“Perez Hilton is fixated on her being John’s beard, but it’s just a rumor.”

Sherlock laughed. “His beard? They’ve got it backwards.”
Sally frowned. “Huh?”

“She isn’t his beard, he’s hers. That woman is a lesbian.” He leaned closer and cocked his head. “She has a longtime partner. At least five years…and her partner is pregnant.”

Sally leaned close too, peering at the screen, where John and Sarah were exchanging inane chitchat with Billy Bush. “Are you sure?” He just gave her a look. “Oh, sorry. Of course you’re sure. So John isn’t gay?”

“Well, he doesn’t identify as such. No man works as an actor for any length of time without having certain experiences.”

“Including you?”

“Did I give any indication that I was excepting myself?”

“You are holding out on me, Sherlock Holmes.”

“What, by withholding information that’s none of your business?”

“Hey, the second someone digs up an old blurry photo of you getting off with some bloke in a bar, it becomes my business, and Greg’s business, and your publicist’s business.”

“There are no blurry photos. I would never stoop to such tawdry behavior.”

“So, what? You hire high-end rent boys?”

“Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?”

“That wasn’t a denial!”

Sherlock arched an eyebrow. “Sally. Really. Do you honestly think that I would have to pay for sex?”

She opened her mouth and shut it again. “Okay, point.”

John took a big swig of his beer, relaxing a little. It was ridiculous that he ought to still get stage fright when he was presenting at these things, having done over twenty films, but this was different. But, he hadn’t flubbed his lines and he’d managed to shake Russell’s hand as he gave him his statue, exchanging an insincere one-armed hug with the man, who he’d never met in his life nor wanted to.

But now, the mildly-enjoyable part. The post-awards party. Sarah had gone home. Both their publicists had screamed bloody murder at the very idea. “There’ll be reports that you went to the parties alone!” his had shrieked. “That she left without you! Trouble in paradise!” He profoundly didn’t care. He had entered into this fauxmance on the advice of those same blasted publicists, although to be fair, he’d known what he was getting into. Sarah was a friend, he wanted to help her, and he hated trying to be single in Hollywood. He wasn’t interested in pursuing a relationship but endless were the women who seemed interested in pursuing one with him, or rather with his name. “I need a permanent cockblock!” he’d shouted to his publicist after fending off a particularly persistent young actress for the fourth time. Her eyes had lit up and he’d known he was in trouble.

But it was wearing on both of them. Sarah wanted to be able to go out in public with the woman she loved, and John felt the pressure of duplicity whenever he was asked about Sarah by a talk-show host or an interviewer. He tried to avoid the topic, but getting journalists to respect your personal
privacy was a task for a better man than he.

The downside was now he was alone at this party. He’d hoped to find some friends, chat a bit, catch up on the gossip. And, if he were totally honest with himself, do some subtle gloating about the film he’d just signed on to, which no doubt everybody here had heard about. The prospect of chatting up some people who’d worked with Sherlock before and could give him the straight dope wasn’t unwelcome, either. If he didn’t get himself locked into conversation soon, he might have to make a run for it. He’d counted at least three young actresses eyeing him so far, all of them hoping to get their photo snapped with him, thus guaranteeing themselves some face time in US Weekly.

*Oh, thank God,* he thought, spotting a familiar face. “Paul!” he said, waving.

“Oy, Watson!” came the answering hail. Paul emerged from the crowd, tall and blond and dashing as ever. John tamped down his height envy. He’d have to be doing that a lot in the coming months. Actors were, on the whole, surprisingly short, but Sherlock was six full feet if he was an inch. Paul shook his hand warmly, grinning. “Nice job up there tonight. Didn’t even trip over your own feet, well done.”

“Oh, thanks, you wanker. Congratulations on not winning, by the way.”

Paul shrugged. “Didn’t expect to. It was a token nomination. Where’s Sarah?”

“Oh, she’s gone home.” John didn’t need to prevaricate. Most everyone in town knew the score.

Paul nodded. “When’s the baby due, then?”

“August.”

“Tell her congratulations from us, eh? I’m hearing some things about Clint’s film. Might be seeing her on the stage next year, and not as a presenter.”

“It’s about time. She’s very talented. I knew it was just a matter of finding the right project.”

Paul smirked. “Speaking of…”

John blushed and ducked his head to hide his grin. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I read that script. I thought it was phenomenal. I’d have gone after Benjamin myself but I’m booked up. I think you’re great for it.”

“Really?” John couldn’t help but fluff up a bit under the praise. He had tremendous respect for Paul as an actor, and his opinion mattered.

“Really.” He looked and sounded so sincere. John didn’t think he was just talking him up. “I’ve been saying for years you need to get out of the rom-com business. It’s fun now and again, but how many has it been?”

“Too many,” John said, taking another drink.

“You’re in a rut, John. This is just what you need. You’re going to knock everyone’s socks off.”

“Ta, mate,” John said, feeling absurdly choked up. “Ta very much. Say, you haven’t worked with Ang, have you?”

“No. Jenny has, do you want to ask her? I think she’s getting a drink.” Paul craned his neck, looking across the room for his wife. He caught her eye and beckoned her over. John drew himself up a bit.
Paul’s wife was one of the most beautiful women in Hollywood, and she’d always been a bit of a fantasy crush of John’s. She came gliding over, looking perfect as usual.

“Hey, John,” she said, kissing his cheek. “Congratulations on the project. It’s very exciting.”

“Thanks. Listen, what’s Ang like to work with? I’m just trying to psyche myself up.”

She looked thoughtful. “Don’t expect much give and take on set. He’s very quiet. He’ll let you know what he wants, but he’ll leave you to do the work yourself.”

“Hmm. Okay. We’ve got a full week of rehearsals scheduled.”

“Yes, he loves rehearsals. Take advantage of that time, that’s when you’ll really worry out how he wants you to play things. He won’t give you line readings, he’ll – well, sometimes he won’t make much sense, there’s still a little bit of a language barrier there, but you’ll get the idea.”

John nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Rely on Jim Schamus. He’s fantastic, he’ll be a real ally for you on set. Where are you shooting?”

“The whole shoot’s in Toronto.”

“Standing in for New York?”

“No, actually, the story’s set in Toronto. That’ll be novel. We won’t have to do that whole ‘I can’t believe it’s not New York’ thing.” John took a breath. “But it’s not really Ang I’m nervous about.”

Paul nodded. “Sherlock. He’s a piece of work. Neither of us have had the pleasure. Russell says he’s a nightmare.”

“I’ve heard he’s all Zen Master and Method while he’s working.”

“Oh, God, no,” Paul said. “Sherlock isn’t Method. That would require emotional awareness. No, he’s a mimic. He’s an astonishing observer of detail. I sat next to him at the nominee’s luncheon when he was up for Kanisza. He could just look at somebody and know who they were sleeping with, how their career was going, how their finances were and whether or not they were thinking about changing agents. And he’s always right. It’s a bit creepy. He doesn’t try to get inside characters. He observes and reproduces. With amazing effectiveness.”

“I hope that’ll be enough for this material. It’s very emotional, more so than the sorts of roles he typically plays.”

“If he wanted the part he must be up for it.”

“Let’s hope so. Our screen test went well. I think we’ll work it out.”

Paul grinned. “If you do, maybe we’ll be seeing you on the stage next winter.”

John laughed. “That’ll be the day.”

Sherlock was pleasantly surprised to find John Watson waiting for him when he arrived at the restaurant, precisely on time as was his habit. People in the business were usually notoriously late, always eager to demonstrate to you that their time and attention were in greater demand than yours. John rose to shake his hand. “Sherlock, nice to see you,” he said, smiling.
“Pleasure,” Sherlock said, neutrally. He sat down and motioned to the waiter. “Vodka and tonic, please,” he said, noting that John was drinking a beer. Of course he was. He looked around at the restaurant. It was a comfortable but obviously upscale place, private and quiet. No one had looked at him twice when he’d entered, and there were no paparazzi camped out at the entrance. “I’ve never eaten here before.”

“It’s a bit of a closely-guarded secret,” John said. “The peanut gallery hasn’t discovered it yet. You’ll find the food very good.”

“I’m sure.”

“So, did you watch the Globes last night?” John said, eagerly.

“I may have caught a few minutes here and there.”

“I was presenting.”

“Oh. Shame, I must have missed that.”

“Did you hear about the bit of nastiness backstage?” John said, leaning forward with a conspiratorial look of gossip about him.

“Why would I have?”

“Marty and Chris Nolan got into a bit of a tiff. Words were exchanged.”

“Oh?” Sherlock said, hoping he sounded profoundly uninterested, when in fact he was keenly so. He was eyeballing a project that he hoped to pitch to Nolan next year.

“I don’t know what prompted it. But you know they’re really squabbling over who gets custody of Leo.”

“Clearly Marty has the greater claim. Leo’s only made one film with Chris. Leo is Marty’s new muse. Besides, Chris has been in bed with Christian for years.”

“That’s gone south. Christian boarded the one-way train to Crazytown last year. Chris would already have stepped back if Christian wasn’t signed for Batman. He’s taking up with Joe pretty strong as well, if you’ve noticed.”

“Joe is one to watch.”

“Yes, he is.” John took a breath. “Well. I asked you to dinner because I thought it’d be a good idea for us to get to know each other a little. We’re going to be working very closely together.”

Sherlock considered his words for a moment. The fact that he was considering them at all gave him a bit of pause; normally he’d just have out with whatever came to mind. “Not that I don’t appreciate your enthusiasm, John, but it’s not necessary for us to engage in some kind of bonding exercise to perform well together.”

“Maybe not, but it might make the whole experience more pleasant.” John shifted in his seat.

“You’re referring to the intimate scenes we’ll be required to perform.”

“Are you concerned about that?”

“No, should I be? I’d think you would have lost your horror of such things, with all the romantic
material you’ve handled.”

“This is different. In those films I kiss the girl and the music swells and it fades out. It’s all very innocent. This is going to be real and raw and honest. I won’t have a lite-rock soundtrack to plaster over the awkward bits.” John shifted again. “And I admit, I’m concerned with what Ang said this morning about the rehearsals.”

“What about it?”

“He’s going to rehearse us separately?”

“Yes, I expected that.”

“You did? It surprised the hell out of me. What’s the point of rehearsing if we can’t rehearse together?”

“We’re shooting this film in sequence, as much as possible. Benjamin and Mark start out the film strangers, feeling their way around each other, coming to an understanding. Ang wants us to be in the same position. He doesn’t want us to be accustomed to one another when we start the shoot.”

John shook his head. “I don’t mind admitting it, Sherlock. I’m not used to working this way.”

“That’s because you’re used to working with pedestrian directors barely a step up from music videos who show up for the paycheck, tell the actors where to stand, sit in silence when they deliver the lines and yell ‘cut.’ Ang is an artist. He has real vision, vision he’ll want us to implement. We have to be in tune with him, not with each other. What is between our characters will evolve through their dialogue and their interaction, not ours. What does or does not exist in our interpersonal relationship is irrelevant.”

“I just don’t know if I can disconnect the way you seem to be able to. I have to access my emotions if I want to portray them.”

“Everyone works differently.”

“And I’ve worked with some visionary directors, I’ll have you know,” John said, his forehead creasing a little. “I worked with Altman. I was in Short Cuts.”

“You were?” Sherlock said, struggling to remember.

“Yes. I got very good notice from that performance.”

“You couldn’t have had much time with Robert. Didn’t that film have something like fifty speaking parts?”

John smiled. “Yeah, it was a bit crowded at craft services. But Robert gave us all his full attention. He taught me more about acting in one day than I learned over a year of night-school drama classes.”

He sighed. “He was a great director.”

“He was,” Sherlock agreed. “I regret that I never got to work with him.”

Silence fell. The waiter came to take their orders. Sherlock waved him away, to John’s obvious puzzlement. “You’re not eating?” he asked.

“John, I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to socialize too much. As I said earlier, Ang wants our characters to evolve together. If he’s keeping us separated for rehearsals, I doubt he’d be thrilled to
find us sharing a meal.”

“One meal doesn’t make us best mates,” John said.

“I’m sorry, I’ll have to bid you goodnight.”

John stared across at him. “You are going to be hard work, aren’t you?”

Sherlock smirked. “That depends entirely on you. Respect my methods and my boundaries and we’ll get along just fine.”

He crossed his arms on the table. “You don’t think I can do this part, do you? Your contempt for me and my career is dripping from every word you say. You could hardly believe it when I told you I’d been in an Altman film.”

Sherlock sighed. “The roles you perform aren’t what I’m accustomed to in my co-stars.”

“I am not the roles I perform, or the sorts of films I’ve been in,” John said, his voice taking on a bit of an edge.

“This film means a lot to me, John. I don’t want it bungled by bad casting decisions.”

“Like me, for instance?” Real anger was rising to the surface. Sherlock had known it was only a matter of time before the tiresome pride and hurt feelings mangled any chances they’d had for a cooperative working relationship.

He sighed. “Those decisions aren’t mine to make.”

“Is this some attempt at sabotage? Make me uncomfortable enough and I’ll quit the film so you can go get McAvoy or whoever else you want to play Mark?”

“Not in the slightest. I wouldn’t lower myself to such methods.”

John got up. “I may surprise you, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock gave him a weary half-smile. “The curse of being me, John, is that I am rarely surprised.”

“We’ll just see about that.” John turned and left the restaurant.

Sherlock eyed John’s half-finished beer, and signaled the water. “Check, please.”

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Key to Meta References for Chapter 2

1. The Vincent Cassel joke derives from an infamous scene in “Ocean’s Twelve” when Cassel goes through an extensive sequence of odd contortionist Cirque du Soleil moves, practicing for a heist.
2. Toronto frequently stands in for New York in films, as shooting in Canada is much cheaper.
3. The actress Sherlock identifies as having taken a younger lover isn’t meant to be anyone in particular.
4. The actor John presents a Golden Globe to is Russell Crowe.
5. The couple that John talks with at the party is Paul Bettany and Jennifer Connelly. She worked with Ang Lee in “Hulk.” Her description of his working methods is drawn from the statements of actors who’ve done films with him.
6. The directors’ tiff John describes involved Martin Scorsese and Christopher Nolan, both of whom are known for forming close relationships with actors and working with them repeatedly. After his longtime collaboration with Robert DeNiro petered out, Scorsese seemed to have found a new
partner in Leonardo DiCaprio, with whom he’s made four films. DiCaprio starred in Nolan’s “Inception” and Nolan’s relationship with Christian Bale is reportedly on the decline after Bale’s erratic behavior of late. The Joe referred to is Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who also starred in “Inception” and is also in “The Dark Knight Rises.”

7. Robert Altman did direct a film called “Short Cuts,” which is brilliant. Needless to say it did not star John Watson.
Author’s Note: I’d like to just clarify one thing: THIS IS NOT RPF. This story is in no way real-person fic. There are cameos by real people in it, yes, because of the setting of the story and it was easier than making up a whole bunch of fellow actors and directors to populate Hollywood (that’s harder than it sounds). But Sherlock and John are characters. Neither of them are meant to be skins over the actors who play them, whom I hope they do not much resemble except in the physical. Their personalities and backgrounds are meant to reflect their characters, not the personalities of the actors.

The following is important to this chapter so I’m putting it up front.

Quick Primer on Two-Shots

A very common type of shot in films is what is referred to as a “two-shot,” or two characters in the same scene and both visible in the shot. Side by side, or across a table, or what have you. In film and television, a conversation carried out by two characters in a scene will typically be seen from a minimum of three angles: the master shot, which is the two-shot in which both characters are visible, and then single shots on each character as if you’re seeing them from over the other character’s shoulder. Editors will mix up these three shots to create the scene so that you see each character while they’re speaking. The scene in Angelo’s is an example of this; McGuigan mixed things up with some additional master shots through the window and such. It’s so common that we don’t really register it as a set of techniques, but it is.

The way this is typically filmed is as follows. The director will film the master shot, the entire conversation filmed in two-shot. Then they will film each character’s side of the conversation separately, first all of Actor A’s lines, then all of Actor B’s lines. These three shots are collectively referred to as the “coverage,” or the total film for the scene for the editor to select his shots from. If a director is particularly keen and if the set permits it, he may set up multiple cameras so that the coverage on each actor can be shot simultaneously. Actors love this because it decreases the number of times they must repeat a scene and it ensures that they’re always performing the scene with their co-star.

Because here’s the thing: you only need both actors for the master shot. Each actor’s individual coverage features only him, so the other actor need not be present and often he or she is not. The actor being filmed will usually have the other actor’s lines fed to him off-camera by the script supervisor. Sometimes the other actor will stick around when he is not being filmed to deliver his lines to assist his co-star with their performance. This is considered exceptionally nice and going above and beyond expectations, because it is easier to act a scene when you’re acting against lines being performed, as opposed to just read by the script supervisor. Tom Hanks is known for doing this, especially when the scene is emotional or demanding. It’s not exactly expected that actors will feed lines, but if it’s a hard scene, it wouldn’t win you any nice-guy points if you didn’t.

Here endeth the lesson.

Chapter 3

John could never sleep well the night before the first day of shooting. Add to that the fact that he was in a strange place in a strange bed and doubly nervous about this particular film, and it all meant that when his alarm went off at 5:00 a.m. he’d only managed a couple of hours. God, the makeup people
are going to hate me. The DP’s going to have to smear Vaseline on the lens to keep me from looking like the Cryptkeeper.

He stared at himself in the mirror, having the usual anxiety battle he always had on his first day of a new job.

Come on. You survived boot camp. You can do this.

Boot camp was all-purpose humiliation. On a film set, it’s personal and directed.

It’s just another script.

Oh no, it isn’t. This is THE script. The one we all wait our whole careers for. The one I became an actor hoping someday to get. The chance to bring something real and meaningful and yeah, maybe even a little world-changing to life on the screen.

You have the chops. You know you do.

Nobody else knows it. Certainly not my co-star.

Give him a few days, he’ll come around. He isn’t stupid, and he values competence.

He heard the door to his apartment open and Harry come in, humming under her breath. “Good morning,” she said, coming into the bedroom and handing him coffee. “Am I in time for the first-day anxiety attack?”

John smiled. “Just getting a good run-up on it now.”

“You know, usually I give you the whole don’t-be-daft speech, but this time you might actually have reason to be nervous.”

“Gosh, thanks ever so.”

Harry slung her arm around his shoulders and met his eyes in the mirror. “You’re going to be brilliant, you know. Seriously.”

“I don’t know, Harry. Will anybody buy it?”

“Buy what?”

“You know. Him, me, a couple.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

John sighed. “Does he have to be so intimidatingly gorgeous all the time?”

“You’re not Quasimodo, luv.”

“I know. But I’m the bloke you take home to Mum and show off to the family. He’s the bloke you drool over from across the room and never get up the stones to actually talk to.”

“I think that’s part of the point. Johnny, this casting wasn’t done on a whim. I think they wanted tension there. They didn’t want two pretty boys, or two boys next door. They wanted you and him.” She patted his shoulder. “Driver’s coming for us in an hour. Better get a shower.”

“It’s the hospital today, right?”
“The waiting room is the first scene up.”

“He wasn’t kidding about shooting in sequence, was he?”

“Nope. It’s right down the line, although some of the outdoor stuff may get shuffled about if the weather doesn’t cooperate.”

“I can’t imagine the weather in Toronto in March being anything other than delightful.”

Harry laughed. “I’ll wait for you in the living room.”

One hour later, John rode in the back of a studio-hired car with Harry, watching the still-dark streets of Toronto flow by. Everything about this film would be a departure from his usual jobs, and not just his part in it. The director had made the somewhat unusual decision to film entirely in practical locations around Toronto. No soundstages. It made logistics more difficult, but it lent a sense of verity to the scenes that couldn’t be replicated. Ang had sat him and Sherlock down after the read-through and explained his vision for the film’s look and mood.

“Stark and minimal,” he’d said. “So that the feeling, it stands out. Desaturated of color. No soft lights, so don’t ask.” he’d said, wagging his finger at them. “Music, very quiet. Maybe no score, no decision there. All things are you, and you,” he’d said, pointing at each of them in turn. “Sherlock, you are like moon. Cold, bright, remote. Far above. Inaccessible. John, you are earth. Steady, warm – accessible. For us we must bring moon to the earth, and raise mountains. The peaks and valleys, like snow caps.”

Sherlock had nodded, as if he understood completely. John had nodded too, even while all he could think was, I have no idea what that means.

The first couple of days he’d be doing double duty. He was playing not only Mark, but Mark’s twin brother James, who was in the hospital having been just diagnosed with cancer. Sherlock’s character was James’ doctor and also his neighbor, and his first meeting with Mark took place while James was in surgery. John eyed the schedule again. Three days until The Scene. This scene at the read-through, even with everyone just marking their lines, not really performing yet, had a lot of the crew exchanging worried looks. He sensed that everybody was dubious about his ability to play this scene, in which Mark came to his brother’s loft and found that he’d killed himself rather than face a slow death from cancer. This was the scene that kicked off the plot. It drove friendly, open Mark to a dark place and forced aloof Benjamin into an unwitting nurturing role. It led to the malpractice suit and Mark’s family drama and Benjamin’s self-destructive behavior and everything that followed.

This scene. This was what he was being paid for. This scene had to have emotional weight, it had to feel real. It couldn’t be overplayed or underplayed. The dialogue was minimal. He’d be doing all the heavy lifting himself, with his face and his body and all the tools he had at his disposal as an actor. Tools he hadn’t had much reason to call upon over the last ten years of commercial films.

This was the scene he’d been waiting for his whole career. And he had to pull it off having been on the shoot for a mere three days.

They pulled up to the hospital where the day’s scenes would be shot. The first scene of the day was the first scene of the film. Mark and Benjamin meeting in the waiting room, strangers, while James, the character who connected them, was in surgery.

John climbed out of his car and was herded over to the makeup trailer by one of the production assistants. Sherlock was already there, reading a Kindle while the makeup artist worked on him. John sat in the other chair, determined to start the day off on the right foot. They’d been cordial at the read-through, but no more than that. And then they both went off for a week of separate rehearsals.
“Good morning,” he said, smiling brightly

Sherlock glanced at him, a quick up-and-down. “You didn’t sleep.”

He didn’t bother to ask how he knew that. “I always have trouble sleeping the night before the first day of shooting.”

“Anxiety is counterproductive to a good performance. It makes an actor indulge his more obvious instincts and reject subtler choices.”

“Well, if you’d be good enough to show me where the ‘off’ switch is on my anxiety, I’ll just shut it down.”

Sherlock gave him a withering look and went back to his book. John sat quietly while his makeup was applied. The woman working on him tutted over his tired-looking eyes but didn’t comment. John watched her work in the mirror, getting that familiar sinking feeling over the sight of his aging face. How long till I’m getting Dad roles? he wondered.

By the time he and Sherlock were in makeup and costume and on the set, the crew had the shot set up and lit. Their stand-ins were sitting on the long couch where they’d play the scene. The cameras were set up to shoot the master.

“Rehearsal!” Which really just meant a run-through to check that everything was ready.

John sat down at his end of the couch, mentally shifting himself to Mark, the character he’d spent most of the past week cementing in his mind. They walked through the scene, marking the dialogue, hitting the marks.

And then it was time. First photography of the film. Ang called ‘action,’ and they were off.

It took three hours to shoot the scene. Ang shot three different master angles. The final angle was a moving dolly shot; they did the entire conversation in one take. Ang called ‘cut,’ and everyone applauded. John took a deep breath, adrenaline surging. He tossed a smile at Sherlock. “That felt great,” he said.

Sherlock gave him a perfunctory nod. “Satisfactory.”

Clara, the first AD, stomped over. “Reset for coverage on Benjamin!” she called. John got up so they could reposition the camera where he’d been sitting. He moved over to the folding chairs set up near the monitors.

“I’ll feed him lines,” he said to Ang. The director turned, regarded him in silence for a moment, then nodded and motioned to Clara.

“I’ll get you a chair,” she said, winking at him.

Sherlock got up and walked around a bit, stretching his legs while the crew reset the lights. Sally, his PA, brought him a cup of tea and they stood off to the side, conferring. The AD called for places and Sherlock walked off-camera. They shot him entering the room a few times, then he took a seat on the couch.

John sat down on a chair next to the camera, in roughly the same relative position he’d been in for the master shot. Sherlock saw him and frowned. “Oh, are you feeding me lines?” he said.

“Yes, of course. It’s an important scene.”
Sherlock seemed a bit surprised by this. “Ah. Well – thank you, that’s good of you.”

“My pleasure.”

They played the scene again over five takes. The cameras were repositioned and they did it again, four takes this time, until Ang was satisfied. “Reset for coverage on Mark!” the AD called, and the crew swung into action again.

John sat down so his makeup artist could touch him up. Harry brought him a coffee and half a sandwich. “He’s staying,” she murmured. John looked past her to where Sherlock was sitting in his director’s chair, talking on his mobile.

“Huh. I guess after I did it, he might look like a wanker if he didn’t.”

Harry shook her head. “You don’t understand. He doesn’t do that. I was just talking to Sally. She said he’s never fed lines for anybody. Not even if they asked him to.”

“Don’t I feel special.” John sighed. “I wonder if he’ll get all sulky after we finish this scene. He won’t be needed much for the next two days. I know plenty of actors who’d whinge that they could have moved this scene later in the schedule so they didn’t have to shoot one scene and then cool their heels.”

“I don’t think he will. Not based on what I’m hearing.”

“What are you hearing?”

“Did you know that he doesn’t insert any stipulations in his contracts? None?”

“Seriously? None?” John thought of himself as fairly easygoing, but even he had a few contractual demands, one of which had to do with Harry being his on-set PA. The others had to do with some baseline requirements he had about accommodations and such. Nothing extraordinary, but they were there in his contracts.

“He has this reputation as a diva, but he’s only demanding about the creative process. He doesn’t care how nice his trailer is or what brand of bottled water they give him. Sally says all he cares about is the work. How did she put it? The rest is transport.”

John sighed. “I admit I thought he’d be a prima donna. You know. Throw a fit if he doesn’t have a particular flavor of organic yoghurt or something.”

“Quite the opposite, it seems.”

“Well, that’s just great. Just when I thought he couldn’t get any more intimidating.”

After lunch was called, Sherlock packed up his script and notes and prepared to head out.

“Sherlock!” John called, hurrying over.

_Oh good Lord, what now? “Yes?”_

“I just wanted to say thanks for sticking around for my coverage.”

Sherlock shifted his shoulders back. He couldn’t say exactly why he’d chosen to do so. John had done so for him, but he was hardly the first actor who’d made the gesture and it had not inspired reciprocity in him. “I hope it was helpful.”
“It was, most definitely. I felt really good about the scene, don’t you?”

God, the man was like a puppy, wanting his belly rubbed. But in fact, Sherlock did feel good about the scene. He felt even the slightest tiny beginnings of optimism that this film might not be sunk by this man’s hamfisted acting after all. But he didn’t wish to get too far ahead of himself. He could only control his own performance. “It was something to build on,” he said.

John deflated slightly. Clearly that wasn’t the ringing endorsement he’d been hoping for. “Well – I guess I won’t be seeing you for a few days.”

“Probably not.” Sherlock would be filming a few scenes that featured only Benjamin in the interim, but by and large he’d be on standby until after James’ suicide.

“I’ll be pulling double duty. Did you see the actor they got to do the body stand-in for James? He’s great, really ripping. Looks just like me. From the back, anyway.”

“I’d expect no less. Good afternoon, John.” He nodded, cutting off the conversation, turned and left. Sally trailed after him, making disgruntled noises under her breath. “do you have a comment you’d like to share, Sally?”

“You could be a little nicer to the man, you know.”

“I’ve never concerned myself with my level of niceness before and this is the first time you’ve remarked on it. Still cultivating your little crush, I see?”

“That isn’t the point. Cut the man some slack.”

“Why should I?”

“That scene was great and you know it. You just can’t bear to admit it.”

“Anyone can do well with a scene like that. Strangers meeting, instant hostility, a point of common concern. It’s like an acting school workshop scene. Nothing he did would cause me to revise my previous assessment of his abilities.”

“Sherlock, I swear…”

“Sally,” he said, tired of the conversation. “Could you bring me that script that Terrence sent over? Thanks. I’ll be in my trailer.” She gave him a this isn’t over look and headed off to get a car back to their hotel. Sherlock walked the rest of the way back to his trailer, its calm silence beckoning him.

He sighed, kicked off his shoes and sat down in the thankfully comfortable chair to read until he was needed again.

Sally came in with take-out around ten o’clock. Day Two of the shoot was in the can, and Sherlock was impatient. He was eager to get into the meat of the story, his relationship with Mark, his crisis of confidence, his malpractice case. For now, he was studying his script, walking around his hotel room, looking for the beats, going over the pacing. “I brought you some garlic tofu,” she said, plopping the bags down on the coffee table.

“Not hungry,” he said, distracted. “Where’ve you been all day?”

“I went to the set to watch the shoot.” She put her hands on her hips. “Sherlock, you really ought to be seeing what’s going on there.”
That got his attention. “Why? Is it that bad? Oh god, he’s not doing the evil-twin thing, is he?”

“I just…” She shook her head. “I should get you the dailies. You need to see this. What he’s doing.”

“What’s he doing?”

“I swear, if I didn’t know, I’d think they’d found two different actors who just happen to look incredibly alike to play Mark and James. He’s – he’s amazing. I can’t even. Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Of course they’re all impressed. They’re paid to be impressed.”

“No they are not, and you know it. Film crews have seen and heard it all, they are the opposite of easily impressed. It’s like…” Sally searched for words. “When he plays James, he’s almost the same, but not quite. Just different enough to make it hugely obvious. And he’s conveying the love and closeness between the brothers so well, you can really feel it.”

“Sally, I’m surprised at you. It’s not like you to be so – gushy.”

“You’d be gushing too if you were actually watching your co-star act. And I do mean act. This man can act. I don’t know how he’s been doing commercial work for ten years but he’s been hiding his light under a bloody bushel.”

“All right, I get the idea!”

“But you don’t believe me.”

“Sally, I refuse to believe that John Watson has been concealing some spectacular dramatic gift for no apparent reason while seeming content to star in insipid date movies. It defies all logic.”

“He’s doing the big scene tomorrow. Will you come and watch?”

“Why should I? I know how he’ll play it. It’ll be a lot of big, showy emotion and wailing and rending of garments and a very convenient Oscar clip. It’ll be obvious and it’ll be accessible. It’ll impress Middle America and it’ll won’t make anybody feel it too keenly. That’s our job, isn’t it? To communicate the feeling, but not too much? To show the emotions, but not too much? It’s all a caricature and that’s what he’ll be.”

“Come and watch. I want you to watch it. You know I can make your life miserable.”

Sherlock sighed. He’d never hear the end of it if he didn’t. “All right, I’ll come. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes. Very. Now will you eat some of this tofu, please? I’m starting to be able to see your ribs again.”

The Big Scene, as the cast and crew insisted on calling it, was technically being shot on a set. An office building that they were using as Mark’s law firm had an empty suite that they’d redressed to look like James’s flat when the location manager couldn’t find a real one that was suitable. The advantage was one of space. The empty office space didn’t have the confining walls of an actual flat, so the cameras had room to move. The other advantage of extra space was clear as soon as Sherlock walked onto the set. It seemed like everyone in the cast and crew had turned up to watch this scene, whether they were needed that day or not. He slunk into the back of the room, not wanting John to know that he was there.
He carefully maneuvered himself to the monitors, keeping himself out of sight. John and Ang were on the set with the stand-in who was playing James for the moment. Sherlock kept quiet and tried to stay out of the way, not wishing to call attention to himself. Ang was moving away to his chair near the camera. The DP was moving into position and John was clearly preparing himself to play the scene.

Everyone was quieting down, going still. Clara called for more quiet. John positioned himself outside the door to the bedroom. He’d be filmed entering, and then it was all him.

Sherlock found himself holding his breath, a little frisson of nervousness crawling into his belly. Ang called for action. The cameras rolled. John entered the room, and Mark saw his brother’s body, a gaudy spray of blood across the wall, the gun still in the man’s hand.

Sherlock waited. He waited for the wailing, for the exclamations, for the cries unto the heavens. For the tears, for the blubbering, for the exhortations and curses and predictable histrionics.

All he heard was silence. You could have heard a pin drop. It was so silent that he could hear the camera’s machinery. He watched the monitors.

Mark walked forward, more or less calmly, but there was a subtle hitch in his steps that wasn’t obvious. He took the gun from James’s hand. He stepped back and unloaded the magazine with quick, sure movements. He dropped the gun and mag on the floor. He walked. Two steps, pause. Two steps, pause. His eyes were stuttering back and forth to James’ ruined face.

The realization dawned on Sherlock that John was not going to go for the Oscar clip. He wasn’t talking. He wasn’t wailing. Sherlock watched the scene unfold and what he saw was something he didn’t have words to describe. It was the cold, blank grip of shock and the unraveling of a man’s world. It was shown to him in small, quick gestures and fleeting glimpses of expressions by an actor who was clearly totally in control, while giving the impression that he was feeling his way through. It was utterly, wrenchingly real, and for a few moments, Sherlock forgot that he was watching a performance. When Mark finally did begin to crumble and the tears came, it was earned, and it was horrible. He heard people behind him sniffing.

It went on for several minutes. There were a few lines of dialogue, very few. John improvised a few more. Sherlock stared at the monitors, excitement growing in his chest.

This movie is going to be like a bomb going off.

Ang finally called cut. The entire assembly broke into spontaneous applause. John straightened up, the cloak of Mark falling away from him, and beamed a wide smile. Sherlock looked around for Sally, caught her eye and beckoned her over. “Well?” she said, eyebrow arched. Sherlock wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction.

“I want to see his dailies from the last two days. Can you get your hands on some?”

“Give me a couple of hours.”

“Fine.” He glanced over to where John and Ang were once again deep in conference. “I’m going to slip out before he sees me.”

“Didn’t I tell you? Did you see that?”

“I saw.”

“And?”
Sherlock sighed. “Get me some dailies. Please, Sally.” He walked out and headed for his car. They’d be shooting this scene for awhile longer but he couldn’t watch anymore. He feared that if he did, he might find out what he already suspected: that John Watson might just be a better actor than he was.

Watching the dailies of John’s work over the past few days, as Mark and as James, Sherlock experienced a strange cascading series of emotions. The first was astonishment at what he was seeing, coupled with the sheer exhilaration at seeing the craft to which he’d dedicated his life being practiced with such understated skill. The second was envy that he couldn’t tell how on earth he was doing it. The third was relief, that John’s acting wouldn’t ruin this film.

The fourth was fury.

He’d go. Right now. He didn’t care that it was after ten o’clock and a bit late for a social call. He’d go and see the man and talk to him and ask him how this was possible. He’d demand answers. He would be satisfied. He stood up and stabbed his arms into his coat sleeves, stalked to the door and yanked it open.

John Watson was standing on the threshold, hand raised to knock. His jaw was set and his eyes were blazing. “John!” Sherlock said, for lack of anything better to say.

John pushed past him and walked in. Sherlock retreated back into the flat, a bit adrift now that his mission had been subverted. “I know you think I’m a hack,” John said, without preamble, his hands on his hips. “I know you have nothing but contempt for me and my career. But just where do you get off asking for my dailies? It’s not enough that you clearly have no confidence in me, now you have to check up on my work? You’ve got some nerve, Sherlock Holmes. I’ve looked up to you, you know. My whole career. I thought you were fantastic, bloody brilliant. No one else could do what you could do. The chance to work with you made me want this film even more. I’d heard that you don’t think anyone is as good as you are, but I thought, surely he can’t be that bad. Well, I was wrong. You’re worse!”

“I’ve got some nerve?” Sherlock said. “I’ve got it? What about you, John Watson? You let me prattle on about your films and your career and our performances, and you knew the whole time. You knew what you could do, and you barely spoke up in your own defense. You just let me go on thinking you were a talentless prole when you bloody knew better!”

John took a step back, caught off guard. “Wh…what?”

“That scene you shot today. The scene everyone’s been mad afraid of.”

John’s eyes widened. “You were there? You saw it?”

“I was there. I don’t know what I saw. That’s why I asked for your dailies, because I needed to suss it out. I needed to suss you out.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying to me right now.”

“I’m saying that what I saw you do today was one of the finest pieces of acting I’ve ever seen in my life, and I have seen some damn fine acting over the years, John. So now you tell me how it is possible that you have been capable of that level of performance all this time, and you let the world think – you let me think – that you were just a journeyman working for a paycheck?”

John put up his hands. “You thought I was good today, just so we’re clear on that.”

“Good? Good? Great God, man. You know what you did, you were there.”
“All right, so you thought I was good, and – you’re pissed? I thought you’d be relieved!”

“I am relieved. I’m relieved and impressed and blindingly envious and I am definitely pissed.”

“How does that work, exactly? You’re pissed that I actually can act my way out of a paper sack?”

“I don’t appreciate being made a fool of!”

Watson shook his head. “Oh, of course. Because me and my career are all about you.”

“No, you cracking great idiot, it’s not about me. It’s about what we do. How could you? How could you slum in these bargain-basement movies and let your abilities atrophy, unused and unappreciated? You’ve denied the world the performances that you could have given, you’ve denied the rest of us the chance to share a screen with you, you’ve denied yourself the chance to stretch and explore who you are as an artist! Do you know how many actors work their whole careers to be able to do what you seem to be able to do naturally? You are spitting in the face of every single one of them, including me, when you don’t do everything in your power to use your talents effectively. It’s an insult. It’s offensive.”

“Oh, now I’ve offended you with my career. This just gets better and better.”

“What was it, John? Was it laziness? Taking the easy scripts so you didn’t have to work hard? Acting with lesser performers so you would always be the best actor in the room?”

John rounded on him, his face set in anger. “ Shut up, you privileged toff. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then explain it to me.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his already-mussed hair. “All right, yeah. I can act. I know it. I’ve always known it. But you have no idea where I come from, and you can’t know what motivates me. You’re from a posh family, public school, the works. I’m not. My parents were so poor that my brothers and sisters and I sometimes had to rummage in bins to find food. We squatted in half-empty council flats and watched the people around us die from overdoses or a case of the sniffles that turned into pneumonia. The Army was the only way out for me. I’d still be in it if I hadn’t gotten shot. I don’t know what drew me to the drama classes but that was where I found out that I had a marketable skill. And that’s all it was to me, marketable. A meal ticket. A way that I could make sure no one in my family would want for anything, especially my parents, who aren’t well. At first the work was exciting, sure. I wanted to show what I could do. But when that first big paycheck came, and I could buy my parents a house and full-time help and send my nieces and nephews to school and give my sister a job to keep her away from the bottle – well, all that mattered was making sure it all kept going. So I took the first jobs that were offered and the ones with the biggest paychecks. If you think I’ve sold out or betrayed my talent then frankly, I don’t give a fuck. If my family is comfortable and taken care of then I’ll gladly sell out.” He paused and took a deep breath. “I almost didn’t take this film, you know. Soderbergh offered me a part in that Savannah ensemble drama half the town is in. It paid better than this does. For the first time in my career, I chose the material over the paycheck, and it wasn’t easy. It was a close thing. You know what tipped it over for me? You. I knew that you were attached. And I couldn’t turn that down. It scared the living shit out of me to take this risk but I did it because to work with someone like you is something I’d long ago given up on. So don’t tell me that I’m not worthy of this script or your esteemed presence and don’t you dare tell me that you’re offended by the choices I’ve made, which incidentally are none of your fucking business.”

He fell silent. Sherlock just sat there and stared. For an excruciating stretch of quiet they stood in
tableau, eyes locked, daring each other to speak first.

“You need for this film to succeed,” Sherlock said. It wasn’t a question.

“Badly.”

“So do I.” He lifted his chin and squared his shoulders. “Shall we get to work, then?”

“Oh God, yes.”

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**Key to Some Filmmaking Terminology**

1. **AD – Assistant Director.** There are usually more than one, ranked in a hierarchy. They do a lot of the day-to-day grunt work of organizing the shoot.
2. **DP – Director of Photography, also known as the cinematographer.** A close partner to the director, the DP is responsible for the look and feel of the film being shot.
3. **Dailies – the raw footage shot over a single day of filming, often runs into ten-plus hours.** Dailies are screened by the director and producer and sometimes the actors over the course of the shoot and are sent back to the studio periodically so they can monitor the production.

Only one significant meta reference in this chapter. The bit about Ang’s semi-nonsensical directions about mountains and snow caps to Sherlock and John is drawn from an interview with Jake Gyllenhaal about the filming of “Brokeback Mountain.” He said that at one point Ang told him and Anne Hathaway that “you go together like milk and water,” and that everyone was nodding like they got it and meanwhile he was thinking “I have no idea what that means.”
Chapter 4

Film Shoot: Week Two

“Morning,” Harry said, joining Sally at the craft services table, as had become their habit.

“All right, then?”

“All right. You seen the Wonder Twins? John left without me this morning.”

“They’re over there,” Sally said, nodding off to her right.

Harry looked and saw Sherlock and John standing under a tree near where the first scene of the day was being set up, heads together, conferring intently. That was more or less their habitual pose these days. Two weeks into the shoot and everyone was still wondering what the devil had happened. They’d begun the shoot keeping their distance from each other, Sherlock aloof and remote as usual, and then overnight they had suddenly become thick as thieves. They spent long evenings together running lines and talking characters and whatever else actors did when they were shooting a film, and it was now standard procedure for them to feed lines to each other during coverage. Their trailers sat empty and unused for the most part. If one of them was on the set, they were both on the set.

As Harry watched him, John glanced over and saw her. He raised a hand in greeting. She nodded back, and he returned his attention to whatever he and Sherlock were talking about. “Chins’ll be wagging,” Sally muttered.

“What about Sherlock?”

“Sarah Sawyer isn’t his beard after all?” Sally said, smirking.

“I’ll claim diplomatic immunity on answering that question. What about Sherlock?”

“He’s equally bored by both genders. I’ve never known him to fancy anyone, not since I’ve been his PA, and that’s three years now. God, has it really been that long?” Sally was watching Sherlock and John. “Then again, I’ve never seen him voluntarily spend this much time with anyone, man or woman, and actually seem to enjoy it.”

Clara, the first AD, wandered over. Harry stood up a little straighter. “All right, Clara!” she said. Goddammit, don’t sound so eager.

Clara smiled. “Morning, Harry. You all seen Anderson?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“He’s bringing the screenwriter on set today. They’re finally going to settle on what the blazes we’re calling this film.”
“Huh. Just when I was getting used to ‘Untitled Film of Gayness,’” Harry said. Sally snorted laughter.

Clara gave her a look. “I know that’s going around the set, but don’t let Ang hear you say it. He’ll get irritated.”

“Oh, I won’t. But having a decent title will be a relief. Give you something to write on the clappers, anyway.”

“How’s the War of the Hydrangeas?” Sally asked, smiling.

Clara rolled her eyes. “Fucking hydrangeas. If I never see another hydrangea in my life it will be too soon. Do you know what the set dressers have to go through to get enough hydrangeas here in March? It’s not exactly the big flower season. Anderson is bitching about the expense but Ang insists. It’s a symbol from the screenplay, he wants them in the background, somewhere on all the sets. Sometimes they just get ideas in their heads and there’s no budging them. I tell him that nobody will ever notice the sodding hydrangeas but no, it’s significant, it’s a symbol of Benjamin and Mark’s delicate and beautiful love and the fragility of life and blah blah blah.”

Harry nodded in sympathy. “When John was shooting Holiday, With Nuts in Martha’s Vineyard, the director insisted that nobody wear the colour blue but John. It was pointless, nobody ever noticed, as far as I know he never gave a reason why, it was just this thing. It was like he thought if he did something pointless and pretentious he’d suddenly be the next Aronofsky.”

“Ang doesn’t need help achieving auteur status,” Clara said. “It’s just not in anybody’s dream job description to hunt down the last hydrangea in Ontario.”

“Oh, here’s Anderson,” Sally said, perking up a bit. “That must be the screenwriter with him.”

Harry watched Anderson, the line producer, approach with a woman. She was small and slender, with bright eyes and an eager expression. “Hi, Sally.” Anderson said, the hint of a smile touching his usually-surly mouth. Ah ha, that’s interesting, Harry thought. Then he was all seriousness again. “Clara, this is Molly Hooper, our screenwriter. Molly, this is Clara Denbrough, the first assistant director.”

“Nice to meet you,” Molly said, shaking hands with a bright smile.

“Likewise.”

“Can you look after her for a while? Introduce her around? Ang is in a conference call with Jim and I’ve got to deal with the funeral extras.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks,” Anderson said. He tossed Sally another shy glance and headed off.

Molly looked so excited that Harry was afraid she might vibrate out of her skin. “So Molly, welcome to the set. Writers don’t always find it terribly satisfying, though.”

“Everybody’s been really nice. I’m just excited to be here and see all of this happening.” She kept glancing over to where Sherlock and John were now just standing around, waiting for the scene.

Harry smiled. “Would you like to meet Sherlock and John?”

Molly nodded, grinning. “I’d love to.”
“I’ll get them. Wait here.” Harry trotted across the parking lot to the tree where their lead actors were both earning their very generous salaries by staring into space.

“What’s on?” John asked, seeing her approach.

“The screenwriter’s here. She’d like to meet you. You know, if you’re not too busy or anything.”

Sherlock gave her The Eyebrow. “Your PA is awfully cheeky, John. You ought to fire her.”

John sighed theatrically. “She’s family. So I suffer in silence.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious, both of you. Come on. Put on your Mr. Nice Actor faces, especially you,” she said, pointing at Sherlock.

“I am always nice. I am the soul of niceness and civility and all things admirable. I know because it said so in Empire magazine.”

They followed her back to where Molly was standing with Sally. Harry smothered a smirk as they approached. If this were a cartoon, Molly would have had big sparkly hearts where her eyes ought to be as she gazed at Sherlock.

“This is Molly Hooper. Molly, this is John Watson, and Sherlock Holmes.” Molly spared John a cursory glance as she shook his hand, her attention rather fixated on Sherlock. John exchanged an amused look with Harry.

“Gosh, it’s amazing to meet you,” Molly said. “I’m such a huge fan.”

Sherlock managed what might be called a charming smile. “Thank you. We’re all very excited about your script.”

Molly seemed to regain her composure and remember her role here. She wasn’t an autograph-seeking fan, she was the screenwriter. “Thanks,” she said. “I was happy to sell it at all, and then to have this director and especially both of you starring in it. I keep waiting to wake up.”

“This is your first script?” John asked.

“Not the first one I’ve written, but definitely the first one I’ve sold,” Molly said, laughing.

Sherlock looked her up and down. “You don’t make your living writing. You’re – oh, you’re a doctor. I’d say…forensic pathologist? You live alone, you write as a creative outlet and stress reliever. You have two dogs. Same breed, something small. You also jog, but habitually you do so after dark, when it’s cooler.”

“Don’t mind him,” John said, seeing Molly’s stunned expression. “We don’t usually let him out of his room when there are normal people about.”

“But that’s…”

“How’d I do?” Sherlock asked.

“Spot on! Everything! How did…”

“Oh, please don’t ask how he knew,” Sally interjected. “Because he will tell you, in great detail, more than you wanted.”

“You also don’t think John is right for this role,” Sherlock went on, as if Sally hadn’t spoken.
Molly reddened and glanced at John, who didn’t seem fazed. “Oh, that’s not true, I… I’m sure you’re just right,” she said, quickly.

“It’s okay,” John said. “You wouldn’t be the first to doubt it. Half the town is waiting to see me bodge this up. Sherlock wasn’t too chuffed at first either, were you?” he said, elbowing Sherlock.

“True. I’m afraid I allowed preconceived notions to interfere with my observations. But I can assure you now that a lot of people will be eating their words.” Harry looked at her brother, who was shuffling a bit, his ears reddening and the corners of his mouth twitching at the praise.

“I know you had Sherlock in mind to play Benjamin. Who’d you imagine for Mark?” Sally asked.

“I thought maybe Jeremy Renner?” Molly said, sounding a tad unsure, as if this might be a breach of etiquette.

John nodded. “Oh, well spotted. He’d have been good.”

“He turned it down,” Sherlock said, flatly.

John looked at him, surprised. “Really? I didn’t know it had been offered to him. Why’d he refuse?”

“The cited reason was scheduling conflicts. I suspect the true reason had something to do with the fact that his date bunged a drink in my face at the Governor’s Ball two years ago.”

Everyone laughed. “So, do we have a title yet for this picture?” Sally asked.

“Oh! Yes, we do,” Molly said, perking up. “We settled it last night.” She paused for suspense, a devilish little grin on her face as everyone waited with bated breath. “The film will be titled To a Stranger.”


“Walt Whitman?” John said, smiling.

Molly’s grin widened. “Yes! You know that poem?”

John nodded. “Passing stranger, you do not know how longingly I look upon you. You must be he that I was seeking.”

“It’s one of my favorites. It seemed appropriate. I love the last line.”

“I am to see to it that I do not lose you,” John recited, quietly. Sherlock was looking at him, eyebrow arched. “What? I like poetry!”

“You are full of surprises, John.”

“Just because you probably couldn’t tell Eliot from Robert Frost. A study of literature and poetry is a valuable thing for an actor. And don’t give me that tired old ‘everything about humanity can be found in the works of Shakespeare’ rubbish.”

“I had no intention of giving you any such – rubbish,” Sherlock said, looking insulted at the suggestion.

“Are they always like this?” Molly said, leaning toward Harry.

“Lately, yes.”
“So I guess you two have known each other for awhile?” Molly asked them.

They both looked at her blankly. “Not really,” John said.

“We met at the first read-through,” Sherlock said.

“Really? Because it seems like you’ve been mates for years.”

They exchanged a look, tiny smiles crossing their lips. “Sometimes it sure feels like years,” John grumbled, but his eyes were twinkling.

Clara trotted over. “Walkthrough, lads.”

“That’s our cue,” John said. “It was lovely to meet you, Molly. I’m sure we’ll have time to talk later. Sherlock and I both have things we’d like to discuss with you about the characters, and a few lines we have some ideas for.”

Molly nodded. “I’ll look forward to it.”

They set off toward the setup. “You came on an exciting day,” Harry said.

“Oh?”

“They’re shooting the park scene today. Benjamin and Mark’s first kiss.”

Molly actually jumped up and down a little, like a kid. “Oh, I was hoping I might get to see that while I’m here!”

“What’s it like?” Harry asked. “Seeing characters you created coming to life, right in front of you?”

Harry had never written anything in her life. Her exposure to the arts was strictly through John. But she imagined that it must be something, having made up a person out of whole cloth and then to see an actor making that person walk and talk and breathe.

Molly smiled, her eyes going a little moist. “I can’t begin to describe it.”

_________

John was nervous. It had been a long time since he’d been nervous before a kissing scene. He’d done so damned many of them, he’d lost track. He’d got off with what felt like half the women in Hollywood. No matter what smirky questions journalists asked during junkets, it wasn’t sexy. It was something you had to repeat a dozen times from five or six angles, not to mention that you were kissing someone you may or may not be attracted to and there was a giant horde of sweaty crew members standing around.

But this was different. He didn’t know why, but it was. It was not his first time kissing a man. He hadn’t ever kissed one for a role, but he’d kissed a few in real life.

Not one like Sherlock. Sherlock was a walking counterexample. He was a brilliant actor who didn’t care about emotional awareness or character motivations. He had a genius intellect but didn’t know who the Prime Minister was. He despised inactivity but had chosen a profession that was 95% waiting around.

And most intrusively, for John anyway, he was an impossibly dishy man who seemed totally uninterested in sex or relationships.

John liked to think he had a pretty good handle on who he was and what he wanted. He wanted to meet someone special – someday – and settle down and have a family. This special someone had
always, in his mind, been a woman. But he couldn’t deny that Sherlock twigged something in his gut, something he was resolutely ignoring. It didn’t help that Sherlock had apparently decided that John was the one person in the world he could be comfortable around, and the only person he would treat like a human being instead of an empty head on legs.

He wasn’t worried about the kiss. The whole “on-screen kiss sparks something off-screen” thing was more or less an invention of the public. Actors knew that if sparks flew off-screen, it wasn’t because of something that happened while shooting a scene. It was because of the extensive time you spent with co-stars and crew while the shoot was going on. He’d heard a fellow actor once say that actors aren’t paid to act. The acting, they do for free. They get paid to wait. It was true. Hours spent between shots, sitting on your duff in your trailer or at craft services. If you were sociable and got on with your co-stars, some pretty intense friendships could grow. Along with more-than-friendships.

Surprising as it was, John felt like he and Sherlock had, indeed, become friends. Sally herself had confirmed this just the night before. He’d been packing up his bag in his trailer when she’d come knocking. “Sherlock wants to know if you’d bring over that book you were discussing earlier when you go to his place tonight,” she said.

“Oh. All right.” Sally had just sort of stared at him. “What?”

“Nothing, I’m just – confused.”

“By what?”

“You know, he’s never had a friend before.”

John didn’t know what to say. He was as bowled over by the idea that a man like Sherlock had never had a friend as by the idea that he himself might now be one, after knowing him for only two weeks. “What about you?”

“Me? I work for him. I put up with his shite and give it back when he deserves it. But I don’t kid myself. I just can’t suss out what’s different about you. Lots of people have tried. Nobody ever got handed the keys to the kingdom, not like you have.”

He’d laughed, trying to make light of it. “Maybe it’s because I didn’t try.”

But Sally had gotten a thoughtful look at that. “Maybe.”

The fact was that he didn’t really have any close friends, either. There was Sarah, but he barely saw her anymore except when they did their dog-and-pony show for the press. She had Anthea and now the baby and her own career. It wasn’t like they spent hours together talking about life. Harry always said that the test of who you considered a good friend was if you were in a wreck at four a.m., who would you ring first?

He pondered this question, and was forced to come to the conclusion that right now? He’d ring Sherlock.

Sherlock was costumed and made up as Benjamin and looked particularly fit today. John looked down at himself. Mark was a smart dresser, much more so than he himself was (being the jeans-and-jumper sort) and he’d been costumed in a suit and a camel-colored topcoat, since it was meant to be midday. The park was roped off, the background extras were in their places. Some spectators were gathered by the ropelines, watching and snapping mobile pictures. John gave them a wave. He heard them squeal in delight and they waved back.

“But don’t encourage them,” Sherlock grumbled, appearing at his shoulder out of midair.
“They’re just watching. They’re not doing any harm.”

Sherlock made a vague growly noise. “I’d prefer not to be gawked at, especially today.”

“Why today?”

“We’re about to kiss, John. Many times. I’m sure any of the fine journalistic entertainment rags would love to have a set photo of that.”

John hadn’t thought of that. “Well, have them cleared off if it makes you happy.”

“What would make me happy is to get to work. Surely they’re ready by now.”

“I still wish we’d rehearsed this once or twice.”

“We did! Dozens of times.”

“Not the kiss.” Which was true. Sherlock had flat-out refused to rehearse kissing John. His logic was that Ang wanted this to be Benjamin and Mark’s first kiss, so it ought to be theirs, too. They’d rehearsed the ramp-up, the grabbing, the aftermath, everything but the actual snog.

John hoped his breath was fresh.

Clara started getting everyone cleared. Molly Hooper, the rather adorable screenwriter, had been installed in a chair near the monitors; she was perched right on the edge of her seat so she could be as close to the action as possible.

Sherlock strode off the set, his prop mobile in his hand. He’d already been filmed approaching the park, talking on the mobile. He’d just wait for the right cue to enter the park. John took his place under the big shady tree, the bay in the background.

Action was called. John began delivering his lines into his own prop mobile. These lines would all be replaced in ADR, of course. No way a good sound track could be laid down outdoors like this. Sherlock delivered his side of the mobile conversation from just off-camera. John moved around, letting his feet communicate Mark’s nervousness, his desire to move things forward with Benjamin even while he feared doing so.

And then Benjamin told him to turn around. He did so, and saw Sherlock striding toward him across the grass. Benjamin had just informed Mark that he’d never taken a risk in his life and he wanted to start now, with him. John let his hand fall to his side. Sherlock tossed his mobile to the ground. He walked right up to him, seized his face, and then…

Then it got different.

In rehearsals, it had always been one smooth motion. Benjamin grasped Mark’s face and they kissed. Benjamin’s initiation of the change in their relationship was contained in the swiftness and surety of that motion.

But this time, Sherlock hesitated. He took John’s face in his large, elegant hands, moved in, then paused. He just checked himself for a tiny second, looking into John’s eyes as if Benjamin were making sure Mark was okay with this.

_Then_ he swooped in and kissed him.

Sherlock’s lips were full and soft. Their noses knocked a bit but that felt right, somehow. It was a
first kiss, after all. A little awkwardness would help to sell it. John let Mark’s surprise stiffen his body, his mobile falling from his fingers, then his hands drifted up and seized Benjamin’s arms and he returned the kiss. Sherlock pressed in and it felt natural for John to open his mouth so he did, and immediately felt Sherlock’s tongue graze his. The rule for movie snogs, at least with women, was no tongue without advance discussion, but they were both men. And as in all else, Sherlock was the exception to everything.

When Benjamin broke off and drew away, he didn’t retreat as far as Sherlock had in rehearsals. They delivered the next few lines of dialogue in a half-clinch, holding the last beat until Ang yelled ‘cut.’ Spontaneous applause.

John grinned. “Fantastic, mate!”

Sherlock looked troubled. “I’m sorry, John. I don’t know what happened.”

“What do you mean? That was brilliant!”

“That wasn’t how we rehearsed it.”

“I know, but it was better, I thought. C’mon, let’s go watch the playback.” They trooped over to the monitors, where Ang was queuing up the shot. They watched it play out and John nodded. “Yeah. That’s definitely better. More realistic.”

Sherlock still looked uncomfortable. “If you say so. Mind if I change it back for the next take?”

John wanted to tell him not to, that what he’d done in the take had been an improvement, but it wasn’t his job to police Sherlock’s acting choices. “Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll be there with you no matter what.”

John pushed open the door to Sherlock’s studio-hired flat with his shoulder, balancing a big bag of Chinese food in the crook of one arm, his other hand occupied with a carrier bag of tonic water and limes. His own flat was directly across the hall, but he hadn’t been spending much time in it. “Oy, Sherlock? Give us a hand with this?”

“I’m occupied.”

“Oh, bully for you, then,” he grumbled. He staggered inside, shut and bolted the door and repositioned the bags for the trip to the kitchen. Sherlock was sitting on the couch, his hands steepled under his nose, doing bugger-all, as far as John could see. “Oh, right you are! I can see you’re so bloody busy!”

“I’m thinking.”

“And you’re incapable of carrying Chinese food and thinking at the same time?”

Sherlock abruptly bounded to his feet. “I was thinking about the scene today.”

“Which one? We shot three scenes today.”

“You know which one. The kiss.”

“What about it?”

“Ang told me that his favorite was the first take, the one with my – aberration.”
“Is that what you’re calling it?”

“It was a deviation from my plan. Yes, I’d call it an aberration.”

“You and your plans. You can’t plan every gesture and every blink of your eyes, Sherlock.”

Sherlock straightened up, looking a bit haughty at the very suggestion. “And why not?”

John frowned. “But…that’s not what you do, is it?”

“John, everything you have ever seen me do in front of a camera is planned and meticulously researched for authenticity. Every tilt of my head, every hand gesture, every intonation of speech is precisely calculated for maximum dramatic realism and effect. Surely you’ve observed this.”

“I’ve observed that you’re very consistent from take to take.”

“Not just consistent. Planned.”

John shook his head. “If that works for you then I won’t criticize. I couldn’t work like that. A performance has to be created from the thoughts, actions and feelings of the character. It has to flow naturally from inside me.”

“Doesn’t that imply that something of you is infused into the character, because he is based on what your emotional responses would be if you were him?”

“Well, I suppose it does.”

“Then that isn’t acting. Acting is putting on the skin of another person, adopting their mannerisms and their speech patterns and their very essence with such realism that there’s nothing of you in them.”

John held Sherlock’s gaze for a moment. “That sounds like a very cold-blooded way to craft a character.”

“Perhaps it is, but it’s worked for me in the past. Ironically, not everyone appreciates the nuance of such an approach.”

“I can’t imagine why,” John said, dryly.

“This is what concerns me. Today I did something that wasn’t rehearsed, that wasn’t planned. And it was deemed better by just about everyone, including you.”

“Sometimes spontaneity can be a good thing. What were you thinking about when you did it? That little hesitation right before you kissed me, that was what sold it. Why did you do that?”

“Well – I’m not sure. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“See? It was a gut instinct. You’ve gone very deep into Benjamin’s character, Sherlock. You really know him, you’ve internalized him. So you did what you thought he might do. Benjamin wants to kiss Mark, he’s committed to doing it, but he’s a cautious man and he’s got that hesitance that we all have when we’re making a change in a relationship. So he does a bit of an eye-check. Just to be sure he’s not got it wrong. You followed your gut. It’s not something to worry about.”

Sherlock rubbed a hand through his hair. “I’m not accustomed to following that.”

“Everyone raved about your intuitive performance in Kanisza. I guess you’ve got them all fooled,
huh?” John said. “You want some of this kung pao chicken?”

“Not hungry. And I’m not fooling anyone. I never claimed to be an emotional, intuitive actor. If people view my performances as intuitive, then that’s their interpretation. How that performance is created is none of their business. They’ll always assume whatever it is that they prefer to believe about how I work. I recall critics singling out one moment in Kanisza, during Alistair’s walkabout…” Sherlock trailed off, eyeing John’s expression. John gulped down his mouthful of chicken, feeling sheepish. “What? John, you look odd.”

“I have an awkward confession to make.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve, uh…never actually seen Kanisza.”

Sherlock blinked. “Oh. I see. Well, then my story won’t have much meaning for you. Forget I spoke.” He stalked back to the couch.

John rolled his eyes. “Come on then, it’s no reflection on you. You know I’m a fan. I just somehow missed that one.”

“I usually make it a point to see the nominated films every year.”

“You’re a member of Academy, you have to vote and all that.”

“Even if I were not, I’m always interested in examining the work of my colleagues.”

“Well, pardon my being an ignorant tosser, but I’m typically working a lot during award season. I don’t have to keep my schedule free for awards and interviews and such the way some people do!” Sherlock said nothing. “Let’s watch it now.”

“What?”

“Let’s watch it now! We’ve got on-demand on these tellies. And if it isn’t there we’ll watch it on streaming.”

“John, there’s really no need,” Sherlock said, softening a bit. “I don’t require you to have viewed my entire filmography.”

“But this is the film you’re most famous for, I really should see it. I’ve always wanted to, it’s just that the time runs away as it does.”

“No, it’s quite all right. We needn’t spend our time watching my backlist.”

John narrowed his eyes, suspicious. “Why are you resisting?”

“I’m not resisting!” Sherlock snapped, too quickly.

“Yes, you are! You don’t want to watch it! Oh, are you one of those actors who can’t bear to watch themselves on screen? Because that would just be too precious for words.”

“I am not – precious! I’m just not comfortable seeing myself.”

“Come on, why not?”

“I can’t stop second-guessing my work!” Sherlock exclaimed. “And I keep thinking, my God, do I
really look like that? With this ridiculous chin and this face? I’m afraid I’m a slave to my vanity, John. Feel free to inform the Daily Mail.”

John was astounded. He sat down on the couch a bit away from him. “Sherlock, are you having me on?”

“No, why would I be?”

“Do you honestly believe that you don’t look good on screen?”

He snorted. “Part of being an actor is allowing yourself to be seen at your less than perfect moments. Doesn’t mean I want to be the one seeing it.”

“I can’t believe this. You have no idea, do you?”

“No idea about what?” Sherlock asked, looking distressed at the concept of something daring to exist that he had no idea about.

“Sherlock – you’re…” John trailed off. Let’s see, how to say this without it sounding like a come-on. He opted for direct. “You’re bloody gorgeous. You should have heard the squeals from every woman I know when I told them I’d be working with you, not to mention playing your romantic interest. Even Sarah, and she doesn’t like blokes!”

“Is that so,” Sherlock said, sounding dubious.

“It is most decidedly so. How can you not know this?”

“I suppose I’ve been told. I just can’t quite see it myself.”

“Oh, none of us can. We all think we’re hideous trolls and no one will ever love us, don’t we?”

“The idea that no one would ever love you is just as preposterous as you seem to think are my doubts about my appearance.”

John flushed, not quite sure how to take that compliment. “Um, thanks, I think.”

“I just mean that you’re the sort of person that most people would find easy to love,” Sherlock hastened to add. “You’re friendly and easygoing and have a way of conversing with people that I have never quite mastered, although if I’d cared to do so I surely would have.”

John smiled, impressed by Sherlock’s backpedaling skills. “Let’s just watch the bloody film, shall we? Your vanity will survive.”

Sherlock fetched a deep, long-suffering sigh. “Very well, if we must.”

Kanisza was, indeed, available on-demand on Sherlock’s telly. John brought over his Chinese and some wine and they settled in to watch it. Sherlock was tense as the film began, but as it unspooled he seemed to relax.

John had read a lot about the film, of course, and knew its basic plot. It had been nominated for Best Picture and many still considered it a travesty that it hadn’t won, beaten out by a more accessible (and more profitable) war film that had been blatant Oscar bait. As it was, the film’s only two Oscars were for its cinematography and for Sherlock’s performance. He’d been the prohibitive favorite that year. Kanisza was almost entirely Sherlock’s film, he was in almost every scene. He played Alistair Templeton, a sheltered Oxford philosophy professor who traveled to Australia to work on a paper
with a reclusive philosopher he only knew through email. The philosopher took Alistair to his remote home in the outback, and then mysteriously died. Alistair remained in the man’s home for several months and found himself living out the philosophical principle of Gestalt that the two had been studying while coming to the disturbing idea that his friend’s death may not have been natural.

John soon forgot his Chinese food, enthralled. The cinematography was stunning, even on this small screen. Sherlock’s performance was as transporting as had been advertised. His Alistair was eager but naïve, properly English but a closet hippie who yearned for a transformative experience.

“This is so Polanski, I can’t even tell you,” John said, about an hour into the film.

“You think so?” Sherlock said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

“It reminds me of The Pianist. All that silence, Alistair alone and without dialogue for such long stretches.”

“That comparison has been made before.”

“My God, how are you holding the screen by yourself without speaking for such long periods? I can’t look away.”

“I invented thoughts and writings and internal monologues for every second of Alistair’s screentime. I can tell you exactly what he’s thinking for every moment he doesn’t speak.”

“It shows.” John fell silent and they kept watching. “Is that as remote as it looks?” he finally asked, about half an hour later, while Alistair was doing his walkabout in the central Australian desert.

“Yes, it is. Terrence insisted on practical locations. Everything had to be shipped in and dear Lord, the generators. We set up a base camp where we could reach a few weeks’ worth of locations by lorry, then moved the camp, and so forth.”

“It is a crime that he wasn’t nominated for this.”

“Agreed.”

They finished watching the film in silence. When it was over, John just sat there for a moment, absorbing it. “Holy God, Sherlock. If I weren’t already in awe of you…” He sighed. “What am I doing sharing a screen with you?”

“You’re doing a proper good job of it.”

“I can’t do what you did in that film.”

“Of course you can’t, nor should you. If you’d been cast, you’d have created your performance, not mine.”

“It wouldn’t have been as good.”

“We can’t know that. Based on what I know of you now, it would have been interesting.”

“Your co-stars were all fantastic, too.”

“I agree. I’d gladly work with any of them again. It’s less certain whether they’d be so eager to work with me again.”

“The word was that you were very intense on that shoot.”
“I had a challenging role to prepare for. I had no time for nonsense.”

“You’ve a challenging role to prepare for now, too. And yet you’re making time to watch films with me,” John said, smirking at him.

Sherlock glanced at him, a tiny half-smile sneaking onto his lips. “Perhaps the company is more motivational now than it was then.”

John was flattered, but he couldn’t think of a way to respond that wouldn’t sound hopelessly ingratiating. “So was it too awful, watching yourself?”

Sherlock made an indeterminate noise in his throat. “I suppose I could get used to it.”

“You looked bloody fantastic in that film. All that flattering late-afternoon sunlight and the tan and the fetching outdoor togs.”

“Terrence kept wanting me to look like some sort of Byronic hero, or like Redford in Out of Africa. I was keen to be as dirtied-up and disheveled as possible. It was nonstop war with the makeup people.”

John looked at him, sitting with his knees drawn to his chest and his hands clasped around them in an endearing, child-like pose. He felt a sudden rush of affection for his odd co-star – certainly the strangest friend John had ever made. He’d never expected to feel any sort of connection to him, let alone to become his friend. But how could he not? The man was a walking gravity well of enigmatic intrigue. “You’re just at war with the world, aren’t you?” he asked, quietly. It was a shame. He wouldn’t have to be at war with it if the world could pause and look for a moment, and see him for who he was. If he’d let them. John supposed there was equal blame on both sides of that particular dust-up.

“It often seems so. But I’m not at war with you, am I?”

John smiled. “I hope not.”

“Good. I find it’s rather pleasant to be at ease, for once.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“At ease.”

Sherlock looked at him and smiled, not his smirky little lip-curl or his ‘I’m being forced to tolerate your presence’ fake smile, but a warm, real one. “Yes, John. I believe I am.”

John smiled back, and for a moment they just let the moment sit there and steep in silence. “Well, shall we queue up one of my films, then?” he teased. “Perhaps you’d enjoy the high-flown dramatic stylings and wacky hijinks of Havana Honeymoon?”

PASSING stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me, as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recall’d as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me, or a girl with me, 5
I ate with you, and slept with you—your body has become not yours only, nor left my body mine
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass—you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you—I am to think of you when I sit alone, or wake at night alone,
I am to wait—I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

--“To a Stranger,” Walt Whitman

Chapter End Notes

MetaNotes for Chapter 4:

1. The quote about an actor performing for free but being paid to wait is by Wil Wheaton, blogger/actor/awesomeness and unofficial King of All Geeks, although he may have been quoting someone else.

2. ADR = Additional Dialogue Recording. Commonly known as “looping.” Almost all films contain some looping; it’s damn near universal for outdoor shoots where wind and traffic noise and leaves blowing and shit often make the audio track recorded during shooting unusable. The actors go into a studio and re-record their lines while watching themselves so they can match their lip movements. Most actors hate doing this and most directors try and minimize the amount that is required. Bad looping is a hallmark of low-budget, poorly-made films.

3. Anderson is the film’s line producer. The line producer is basically the film’s shop foreman. The producer writes the checks and hires everyone, the line producer makes sure the trains run on time and the shit gets done on-set. The producer is often not on set (most producers have more than one project going at once) but the line producer always is. They’re doing most of the day-to-day work running the shoot. It’s a thankless but infinitely crucial job.

4. The “Terrence” referenced is meant to be Terrence Malick. Sherlock already referenced him in the last chapter. The sort of film that I’m describing in Kanisza would probably require a director with pretty rarefied auteur sensibilities but the ability to direct intense on-location shoots and handle big sweeping productions. Malick directed The Thin Red Line and has that reputation.

5. If you haven’t seen The Pianist, do it immediately. In my opinion it’s a better Holocaust film than Schindler’s List. It is not an easy film but it is brilliant.

6. The “Aronofsky” referenced is Darren Aronofsky, probably the most prominent bona-fide auteur filmmaker working today. He directed Requiem for a Dream, The Fountain, The Wrestler, Black Swan and others.

One note about me: I’ve gotten comments regarding my knowledge of the film industry. I ought to clarify that most of it is secondhand. I do not work in the film industry, although I’ve known people who do, and I read a lot of books about it. I have written in
the film-analysis and criticism areas and have learned a lot that way. Still, I am no doubt making mistakes, oversimplications and out-and-out fabrications. So don’t take it all on faith. It’s as accurate as I can make it but no guarantees.
Chapter 5

Film Shoot: Week Four

“That’s lunch, people!” Clara yelled. John got up from his seat at the conference table and stretched his back. Sodding talky scenes, always seemed to take forever. “John, you’re wrapped for the day. Sherlock, costume change.”

Sherlock replied with a distracted nod. He had his dog-eared, marked-up script in his hands and was scribbling something in the margins. John meandered over. “Big afternoon.”

“Mmm. No more than usual.”

“You’ve got that scene with Mark’s mother and then the hospital administrator.”

“Confrontational scenes are easier to play. Heightened emotions always lend themselves to cinematic presentation. It’s the subtler interplay of less exaggerated expression that presents a challenge.”

John sighed. “Why must you always sound like you’re talking to James Lipton?”

“Who’s James Lipton?”

“James Lipton, Sherlock! You know – that chap at the New School who…” Sherlock just looked at him, blankly. “Of course you don’t know.” He clapped Sherlock on the shoulder. “I’m off, then.”

“Grand plans for your brief liberty?”

“Oh, yes. I thought I’d read a book and take a kip.”

Sherlock smirked. “Ah, the wild life of a movie star.”

“Let it never be said that John Watson doesn’t know how to throw a proper knees-up.” He smiled and started off.

“John?”

He turned back. “What?”

“See you later, then?” Sherlock was affecting a casual, nonchalant tone, but John wasn’t fooled. He needn’t have worried. John couldn’t think of anything he’d rather do than spend time with Sherlock, a fact that was beginning to worry him a little.

“You bet, mate.”

Sherlock nodded and walked off towards the costume trailer. John went to his chair and pulled his mobile out of his jacket pocket. He had a text message from Sarah. Ring me when you have some time.

Uh-oh. That didn’t sound good. Harry appeared at his elbow just as he was lifting his head to look round for her. “How do you do that?” he said.

“I’m good at my job. Back to the flat?”
“Yeah.”

“Mind if I stay here?”

John smirked at her. “Hoping to chat up Clara some more?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’ve had it on good authority that she fancies you a bit, too.”

“Huh. And would this ‘good authority’ by any chance be a tall, dark-haired wanker with a fondness for sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Get in the car, you bloody tosser.”

Sherlock was manhandled back into the makeup trailer to have himself retouched after his costume change. He smiled when he saw who was sitting in the other chair. “Oh, do come here, darling. Give us a kiss,” Emma Hudson trilled, pulling him down.

He kissed her cheek. “How are you, shrubs?”

“I’d be fine but I’ve barely got to exchange two words with you since I got here, I’ve had all my scenes with John. He is so lovely, dear, and so talented. I must say I was a little bit…” She trailed off, troubled.

“Surprised?” Sherlock said, smiling. “Don’t distress yourself, we all were.”

“I must say it’s a relief not to be playing the same tottery old mum all the time. At least this bird’s got some spine to her.”

“Tottery old mum? Was it you, or was it not you, who played a hired killer last year?”

“Oh, great fun, that was. I got to shoot guns and pretend I knew kung fu.”

“Ah, yes. Emma Hudson, License to Kill.”

“You watch yourself, young man, or I’ll show you my kung fu grip.”

Sherlock chuckled. There weren’t many actors whose company he enjoyed, but Emma Hudson was one of them. She’d played his mother three times and once, memorably, his lover. He’d lobbied for her to be cast in the role of Mark’s mother. It was a difficult role, even an unsympathetic one. Most of the conflict between Benjamin and Mark arose from the fact that Mark’s family blamed Benjamin for James’s death. Emma came across like everyone’s dotty aunt with her antimacassars and tea cozies, but she was a sharp, seasoned RSC mainstay who had once turned in a jaw-dropping performance as Queen Lear in their memorable gender-swapped production. Theatergoers still spoke of it with reverence.

“Just hold onto that fearsome rage for our scene,” Sherlock said.

Emma was looking at him, her gaze analytical. “Something’s different about you, luv. I noticed it the first day I came on set.”

“I am as I ever was, Emma. Unchanging as Gibraltar.”
“Ah, but Gibraltar changes constantly. Rock seems so solid but the water wears it away. All it takes is time.” She cocked her head. “You’re spending a lot of time with John.”

“We’ve become – friendly. We’re working well together. It’s a relief to have a partner in this endeavor rather than someone whose company I’m merely enduring.”

“He’s very different from you. As an actor, I mean. You might learn something.”

“Dear Lord. Why is everyone suddenly so keen for me to learn from him? Has it ever occurred to anyone that he might learn something from me? I’m the one…” He stopped himself, realizing what a git he’d been about to sound like. “Well.”

“You’re the one with the Oscar, right?” Emma said. “That’s what you were going to say.”

“Well, what if I was? It’s true.”

“You do have an Oscar. And you were brilliant in that role. But you created that performance doing exactly what you’ve always done.”

“Why is that bad?”

“It isn’t. It’s just that – it might not be enough. Not for this. Not with him.”

Sherlock huffed out an impatient breath. “It’s ironic that John Watson has managed to redefine this entire production, right down to my acting habits, with one scene in which he defied expectations. Why should everything be different because it’s John bloody Watson?”

“I don’t know, luv. You tell me.”

He looked at her patient, open face and some of the irritation left him. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and rubbed his hands through his hair. “I don’t know either, Emma. I don’t know why it’s different, but it is.”

John tossed his bag to the chair and got out his mobile, dialing Sarah with one hand while he made himself a drink with the other.

“Hello?”

“Sarah, it’s John.”

“Oh, hello. Thanks for getting back so quick.”

“I’ve got the afternoon off.”

“How’s it going up there?”

“Fantastic, actually. But I don’t want to jinx it.”

“There’s talking come off that set. One might even characterize it as ‘buzz.’”

“What sort of buzz?”

“About you, mostly. About your unsuspected acting brilliance.”

John snorted. “Nobody will believe that.”
“I believe it, John. Then again, I don’t have to. I know what you’re capable of.”

“I shouldn’t be hearing this.”

“Why not?”

“Because no actor can perform well if he thinks he’s brilliant. He has to secretly believe he’s horrible.” He hesitated. “Although I may be acting with the exception to that rule.”

“Sherlock? How is he? A nightmare?”

“Oh, he’s arrogant, all right. And rude and demanding.”

“But?”

“I don’t know. He’s charismatic. And once you get past all the bluster he’s actually rather sweet. Or can be, when the mood suits him.”

“You’re getting along, then?”

“Actually – and don’t faint with shock – we’ve gotten to be rather close mates.”

“Really?”

“Really. I think I managed to impress him, somehow, so I’ve been judged worthy company. And since I’m the only one who has been, he’s spending all his time with me.”

“Doesn’t sound like you object to that very much.”

“No. I like him. We’re doing some good work.”

“Oh, is that so? What sort of – work?”

“Stop it,” John scolded her, feeling heat creep up from his collar. “From your insinuations to the pages of ‘Entertainment Weekly.’”

“That wasn’t a denial!”

“Sarah, I am not having an affair with my insufferable co-star. All right?”

“All right, if you insist.”

“But I doubt you called to talk about my tawdry off-screen love life, or lack thereof.”

“No.” He heard her sigh. “John – Anthea and I have been talking, and I think it’s time we engineered our release.”

He nodded. He’d seen this coming. “I thought that might be it. You’ve spoken to your publicist?”

“Yes. He pitched a fit, then he got over it and started planning the spin control. Is this okay with you?”

“Sarah, I got into this to help you. It’s been convenient for me, too, but I can handle being single. I’ll just take lots of jobs with far-flung location shoots.” He hesitated. “I’ll always be your friend. But you have a family. Anthea and the baby should be your top priority now. Everything else can go rot.”
He heard Sarah sniffle a little. “Thank you, John. I knew you’d understand.”

“What’s the party line going to be, then?”

“We’ll blame it on the usual reasons. Conflicting schedules, no time together, want different things, et cetera.”

“What’ll happen when you come out? You can’t tell everyone that you’ve been with Anthea for five years. And then the baby…”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do. Part of me just wants to say fuck all of them and tell the goddamned truth. That you and I faked it so that I could have a career because Hollywood is just that fucked up. But I won’t. It’s tempting.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I wouldn’t put you in that position. Everyone would assume that you’re gay, too.”

“I don’t care fuck-all about their assumptions.”

“But John, with the film you’re doing now – it’s not the right time. This film could redefine you. I can’t put that in jeopardy. You and I will make a quiet announcement through our publicists. I will just as quietly resume my life with Anthea, make whatever efforts we can to keep our lives private, and let them all talk. I’ll go public when she and I decide it’s the right time. What you say about our relationship is up to you. I’ll just say that you’re my good friend, then and now, and that you helped me through a hard time.”

John felt himself getting a bit choked up. “Oh, Sarah, luv – I hate this. I hate that it was ever necessary.”

“Anthea is worth it. Our baby is worth it.”

“Good. Just stay focused on that.”

“I’m going to wait until after your shoot is over to break the news. I don’t want the press hounding you while you’re up there trying to work.”

“I appreciate that.”

“And I wasn’t lying about the buzz. I’m surprised Mike hasn’t been calling you.”

“Well, he has. I can’t put much stock in any interest that’s generated before anyone’s seen this bloody film.”

“It’s happened before. Ed Norton got such strong buzz off the set of Primal Fear that he’d booked two more jobs before the film was even released.”

“I don’t want to book anything else right now. I’m actually hoping to take some time off once we wrap.”

“When do they want to release?”

“They’re hoping for December. Holidays, awards season, you know.”

“Blimey, that’s a fast turnaround. You and Sherlock will barely have time to breathe before you’re doing ADR and press.”
“He’s doing a play in London right after we wrap, too. Three months run of a revival of *Closer* at the National.”

Sarah was quiet for a moment. “You really like him, don’t you? I can hear it in your voice.”

“I do, yeah. He’s certainly the most challenging friend I’ve ever had.”

“Is that all?”

John opened his mouth to say that yes, of course that was all, what else could there possibly be, because he is him and I am me and neither the twain shall meet, and by the way I am a Hollywood leading man and must therefore be attached only to attractive women, and this is a film shoot and anything extra is pure dramatic adrenaline so if I ignore it, it’ll go away, but sometimes I look at him and realize that I’m smiling a bit too grandly and I’ve got that little nervous knot that you get when you’re around somebody you fancy and I ought to be able to handle this, for fuck’s sake, because I am an enlightened modern man and if I can’t tell my lesbian girlfriend that I might be falling for my male co-star then I can’t tell anybody.

All that came out was “I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“He is a beautiful man, John.”

“Yes.” There was nothing more to say.

“Be careful, okay? I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

John chuckled. “Then maybe you’d best just keep your eyes shut.”

Sherlock’s footsteps weren’t hard to follow, given that he was stomping around like a toddler having a tantrum. John trotted along behind, ignoring the averted glances of the crew, all the way to Sherlock’s trailer. He caught the door just as Sherlock tried to slam it in his face. “Oh, no you bloody don’t,” he said, following him inside. “You don’t get to pull this shit on me, not now.”

“Sod off. I’m entitled to a bit of a sulk.”

“You are not combating your reputation as a difficult diva when you storm off the set in a huff.”

“Who says I want to combat it? If people worry that I’ll pitch a fit at the slightest provocation, they’re more likely to acquiesce.”

“I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear that. I will not have you get yourself sacked from this picture, do you hear me? Not after all the work we’ve put in.”

“I’m not going to get sacked, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Ang didn’t look too thrilled, and you’re bodging up the schedule! I don’t want to put in a fourteen-hour day because of you and neither does anyone else.”

“I just…” Sherlock sighed. “I need a moment.”

“To do what?”

“Regroup.”

“Regroup? That isn’t what you need.”
“Oh, then please do inform me what it is that I do need, Oh Great Oracle of Watson!”

“You need to bloody let it go, already! The Holmesian School of Acting is not cutting it for this scene! Ang keeps telling you to let go and you keep sticking to your preordained series of eyeblinks or whatever else you’ve planned out in insane detail.”

“That is what I do, John. It has never failed me before.”

“It isn’t exactly failing you now, Sherlock. You’re brilliant, you are always brilliant, but you can’t be what you always have been. Not for this.”

“Oh, of course! I should just abandon every technique I’ve ever cultivated over my fifteen year career and toss my craft to the wind, because all I’ve really got to do is feel, right?”

“No, that’s not bloody all, and oversimplifying it to make it sound stupid isn’t going to win you any points, either.” He sighed. “All right, Holmes. First day of acting school. What’s an actor’s greatest enemy?”

“Fear.”

“Fear of what?”

“Fear of being seen.”

“And what does that really mean?”

Sherlock frowned. “That’s not a question.”

“Not one they asked you in drama school. It’s my question. So what does it really mean to be afraid of being seen?”

“I feel sure you’re about to tell me.”

“It’s the fear of being honest, Sherlock. We carve out personas for ourselves to be presented to the world, and it’s human nature to hide reality. We cover our faces when we cry, we glance around in embarrassment when we trip on the street, we seek isolation when we feel our deepest emotions. As actors we must do the exact opposite, and the hardest part about what we do is short-circuiting our innate human fear of showing our inner selves to others. But you never did that, did you? You found a workaround. When we see you onscreen in tears, or in anger, or in shame or sex or anything else that we fear to show, we are seeing not you in that state but a very close-fitting imitation that you’ve stretched over your skin. Oh, it’s a brilliant imitation, to be sure. It’s affecting and it feels real. But it isn’t.”

“Is it ever real? When you cry onscreen, do you really feel the sorrow?”

“Sometimes. But I have to take my own sorrow and use it as a seed crystal, so that I can grow my character’s sorrow.”

Sherlock said nothing. “I work the way I work, John.”

“Why are you afraid to stretch? You are brilliant now, Sherlock. But if you took that last step, you could – my God, you could be like nothing anyone’s ever seen. You could be the world’s greatest living actor.”

His head snapped up. “And I should listen to you, why? Oh, that’s right, because you are John
Watson, Surprise Acting Prodigy, whose fearsome dramatic gifts can be seen on glorious display in such fine cinematic masterpieces as *Shave and a Haircut!*

“Oh, you liked that one, did you? One of my favorites! I particularly enjoyed the scene when I had to go down a fucking waterslide in a clown suit!” John took a deep breath. “Attacking me isn’t going to help, Sherlock. And I know you’re only doing it because you’re a bloody child who can’t handle his real emotions!”

“And he’s also a psychologist!” Sherlock exclaimed, tossing his hands into the air in a sort of ‘hallelujah’ gesture. “How fortunate I am to have such a multitalented co-star to sort me out!”

John grit his teeth. “God, I was really, really not wrong when I predicted that you’d be hard work, was I?”

“Feel free to bugger off, then.”

“And leave you here to sulk? Not bloody likely. It’s my film, too. Like it or not, we are in this together.”

He stood there near the door to Sherlock’s trailer and watched while his co-star paced in tight, short zigzags. He could all but see the pique oozing from Sherlock’s pores.

Several minutes passed. Sherlock stopped pacing and stood with his back to John, then his shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry, John.”

“It’s all right.”

He turned around, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I didn’t – that is, what I – I didn’t mean…”

“I know.”

“You know what I think of you.”

“Stop apologizing, it’s giving me the willies.”

Sherlock smirked. “So what do I do?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell you how to access your inner self. Have you ever tried? Has anyone else ever tried?”

“No,” Sherlock said, a note of wonderment in his voice, like this had just occurred to him. “No one’s wanted to.”

They weren’t talking about acting anymore. “How is that possible? How is it that no one’s ever gotten close?”

Sherlock met his eyes. “I made sure they didn’t want to try.”

John held his breath. “Well, it isn’t working on me.”

“I haven’t wanted it to.”

They held each other’s gaze for a few long beats, then John looked away and ruffled a hand through his hair. “So, this scene.”

“Right,” Sherlock said, clearing his throat.
“We’ve been over it a hundred times.”

“God, yes.”

“You trust me?”

Sherlock looked up at the unexpected question, but his answer was immediate. “Yes.”

“Okay. And I trust you. Because this is in you, and in me. We just have to really be there for each other in the scene. Got it?”

He nodded. “I was afraid you were about to go for one of those hoary old drama-school exercises. Have us play each other’s parts, or improvise new lines or some such nonsense.”

John smirked. “Even if I were, I’d wager that drama school was the last time you let yourself be led in unexpected directions. Wouldn’t kill you revisit that experience.”

“After this shoot wraps, I’ll be sure to sign up for some of those night courses you took.”

“Not all good acting happens at RADA, you know.”

Sherlock nodded. “As I have daily proof.”

Warmed by the indirect praise, John dropped his hands. “Come on. Let’s try this again.”

“Very well.”

He turned and opened the trailer door, unsurprised to find Clara standing there, arms crossed, tapping her foot. “You chaps ready to get back to work?” she asked.

“We’re ready.”

John followed Sherlock back to the set. Benjamin’s apartment, a real apartment in northeast Toronto. To his shock, Sherlock apologized to Ang and the crew for the disruption, and asked to continue the shoot. John glanced around; everyone looked mollified.

He shut his eyes for a moment and thought about his own character. Mark had to be fearful and angry in this scene. He’d been cut off at the knees, he felt betrayed, and he was afraid that Benjamin only loved him because he looked like James. And how could he love a man who might have contributed to his brother’s death?

Sherlock took his mark. The cameras rolled. John had the first line. He delivered it, and Sherlock replied. But then, John let the pause between lines roll out for longer than he ever had. Sherlock met his eyes and John held him there.

“We’re in this together. I am here with you.”

Sherlock didn’t look away. There was no question in his eyes, no doubt about why John was not speaking. He stayed there with him in the quiet, in the men they were playing, and when John finally did speak, he could tell immediately that it was different. The long pause had undercut the scene with new tension.

As the scene unspooled, he saw it start to happen. He saw the layers of careful construction peel away from Sherlock in raggedy strips, an incomplete exposure, but it was exciting. He waited to hear “cut,” for Ang to want to change camera angles, but he didn’t. He kept going, buoyed by the manic energy in Sherlock’s body, restless and moving around, Mark’s urgency taking over John’s own
The high point of the scene approached. Benjamin met Mark’s eyes and for a split second John saw Sherlock looking back at him.

*Let go. I’m with you.*

John went to Sherlock’s trailer after scrubbing off his makeup, glad to be back in his jeans and his favorite cardigan. Ang was there, talking quietly with his lead actor (or one of, anyway). Sherlock was slouched in a chair, his legs stretched out in front of him with ankles crossed, looking up at Ang and nodding. His face was relaxed, a slight smile lingering on his lips.

Ang turned when John entered. “Oh, sorry,” John said. “I can come back.”

“No. Finished.” Ang put a hand on John’s shoulder. “Excellent today. Very good.”


“I feel like I’ve gotten the worst of the back end of a bus.”

“Well, you ought to feel like a bloke who just blew the doors off that scene.”

“It wasn’t much different.”

“Not much. Sometimes the smallest change makes the biggest difference.”

Sherlock stared off into space. “Just the other day I was telling Emma how odd I found it that everyone’s been speaking of my learning from you, rather than the other way round. Tell me, John. Has it always been so evident to everyone else that I had so much to learn, and I’m the last to know?”

John sat down facing him. “What makes you think I haven’t been learning from you all this time? I’ve done nothing else since we started this shoot. It isn’t that they all think you have a lot to learn and I don’t, Sherlock. It’s that I know that I have a lot to learn.”

“And I might need reminding.”

“You don’t exactly give off a vibe of humble receptiveness.”

Sherlock laughed, a short, sharp sound. “I don’t suppose I do.”

John chuckled, and they just sat there for a moment in comfortable silence. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh, dear.”

“No, you’ll love it.”

“Dazzle me.”

“We’ve got tomorrow off. Let’s go sightseeing.”

Sherlock frowned. “Sightseeing?”

“Yes! You know. Go and – see the sights.”

“The sights of Toronto?”
“There are sights! I’ve seen them!”

“Then why would you wish to see them again?”

John didn’t have a good answer for that. “It’ll be fun. The weather’s supposed to be lovely tomorrow. We can walk around and eat food that’s bad for us. It’ll do us good to get out, get some air, some exercise.” He grinned, putting on his most eager face.

Sherlock looked at him for a moment, then heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Oh, very well. If it’ll make you happy.”

He’d given in to please John – his way of thanking him for the tiny leg-up he’d given him in their scene the day before – but by midafternoon, Sherlock was forced to admit that he was enjoying himself. As promised, the weather was lovely. Cool enough for jackets, clear blue skies, and a light breeze that bore the promise of spring.

He and John took a boat tour of the islands in the morning, refreshingly bereft of tourists given that it was both the off-season and a weekday. Sherlock half-expected them to be recognized and asked for photos or autographs, but no one seemed to pay them much mind. At another time he might have been secretly annoyed by this, but today he was glad to be left alone.

Alone with John.

They had lunch in a restaurant on Queen Street that served nothing but crepes. “Something of an arbitrary restriction, isn’t it?” Sherlock murmured as they got in line.

“But it’s brilliant. Everything’s good in a crepe. Ooh, I want Nutella in mine.”

“John. That’s hardly an appropriate lunch choice. Get something with some protein in it.”

“Anytime is a good time for Nutella.”

After lunch, carbed up on crepes, they walked up University Avenue through Queen’s Park and past the Royal Ontario Museum. “I’ve been here a dozen times but I’ve never gone in there,” Sherlock commented, as they walked by.

“It’s a nice museum. We can go in another time. I want to go to Casa Loma.”

It was a long walk to Casa Loma, but they had time and it was a nice day. They didn’t talk much en route. Sherlock found himself quite content just to be at John’s side. He was a calming presence, moving through the world as if he knew its innermost workings and nothing and no one in it held any mystery for him. Sherlock, who often found the behavior of other people and the ways of society incomprehensible, felt like he had a translator at his side. A buffer between him and the rest of the world that chafed and irritated.

Sherlock had known that Casa Loma was a castle-like edifice sitting on a hill overlooking Toronto, popular as a film set, but he’d never been there. As he and John stood at the base of the long staircase leading them up to the building, he looked up at its facade and was begrudgingly impressed. “Interesting,” he said.

“Oooh, this merits an ‘interesting!’” John teased. “I wonder what Windsor Castle would get out of you.”

“I’ve been there. I favored it with ‘fascinating.’”
John laughed as they started up the steps. They paid their admission and walked through the house. The interior looked very familiar, which wasn’t surprising after Sherlock saw the multiple signs hung about listing the many films that had been shot here. “Have you ever filmed here?” he asked.

“No,” John said. “I’ve never been in a film grand enough to merit using this place.”

Unfortunately, the anonymity they’d enjoyed so far chose that moment to expire. “Oh my gosh!” said a voice, the tone and inflection disappointingly familiar as that of Fan On the Street. “You’re John Watson!”

They turned toward the speaker, a twentysomething young woman with two friends, all three of them staring. John gave them his neutral meet-the-public smile. “Yes, hello.”

Sherlock stood there, expectantly, but remained unacknowledged. “I have to tell you, Mr. Watson, that my family watches *Holiday, With Nuts* every Christmas. It’s our favorite movie. It makes us feel normal in comparison.”

John grinned. “Well, it’s good to know I’m contributing to family unity in some small way.”

“I had such a crush on you when I was sixteen!”

John shot Sherlock an amused glance. “Well, thank goodness you grew out of it,” John teased her.

She flushed bright red. “Oh, damn – that’s not – I mean, I still sort of have a crush on you,” she stammered.

Sherlock sighed. He supposed it was too much to ask that some sorority girls who favored holiday films of the wacky-hijinks variety had seen *Rotisserie*. One of the Watson fan’s friends was looking at him, though. Suddenly her face went slack and her eyes went wide. “Holy shit!” she exclaimed, then slapped a hand theatrically over her mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry, excuse my language, but you’re Sherlock Holmes!”

“Yes,” he said.

“Who?” said the third of the trio.

“You know! He was in that movie, in Australia! We watched it last year in Philosophy class.” Sherlock frowned. A philosophy class was watching *Kanisza*? What sort of university showed theatrical films as part of their curriculum? “That movie changed my life,” the young woman gushed. “You were so amazing in it!”

“Thank you, that’s kind of you to say,” Sherlock said.

John was signing something for the first young woman. “So are you two, like, here together?” she asked, her eyes flicking from one to the other.

“We’re just sightseeing,” John said. “We’re in town shooting a film.”

“Really? Both of you in the same film? That’s fantastic!”

“I think it’ll be a good film,” John said, dropping Sherlock a barely-perceptible wink.

“Can I have your autograph, Mr. Holmes?” the philosophy girl asked, holding out a notebook and a pen.

“All right,” he said.
“My name is Cathy, with a C,” she said, batting her eyelashes at him. She was quite pretty. And she was definitely flirting with him. The stray thought struck Sherlock that if he were so inclined, he could probably take this girl somewhere right now and have sex with her. The strangeness of his profession never ceased to fascinate him, that it could put any person in such a position. He knew plenty of his fellows in the business took rabid advantage of it. He never had. No one who’d ever offered herself (or himself, and there had been plenty of each) had ever piqued his interest.

Sherlock wrote “To Cathy, Sherlock Holmes” in her notebook. He noted that John was adding a more personal note to his autographs, such as “best wishes” or what have you. He never knew what to write, unless someone asked him to write “happy birthday” or the like.

Predictably, the girls asked for a photo. A passing guard was conscripted, and the photo was taken. Sherlock wondered how haggard he looked. He always seemed to appear haggard in candid photos. John would no doubt look like the very picture of robust good health.

The girls thanked them and waved goodbye, then continued on their way. “I told you we would be recognized,” Sherlock muttered as they walked through to the garden.

“Oh, that was pretty inoffensive as encounters with the public go. They were polite, they were nice.”

“They were attractive. Your holiday fan would probably have had you off right there in the hallway.”

“Oh, as if Ms. I Love Philosophy wouldn’t have wrestled you to the ground in a heartbeat,” John joked.

Sherlock sniffed. “I think I could have emerged victorious in a wrestling match against a twenty year old girl, John.”

“I’m sorry, how dare I besmirch your hand-to-hand combat skills?” John was grinning, as if he were having the best time of his life. That couldn’t be possible, as no one would ever count spending the day with Sherlock as among their top ten most-cherished activities, but at least he didn’t seem bored.

They walked through the gardens, not very impressive in their late-spring condition, and back out to the street. Tired from their walk up, they hopped a trolley down to Kensington market in search of dinner. After passing many stalls and vendors, they came up to an intersection and were faced with a rather ramshackle restaurant called “The Hungary Thai.”

“Hmm,” he said. “Is it Hungarian, or is it Thai?”

“Maybe it’s both. We have to eat here.”

“If you like.”

They went inside, and John was delighted to discover that indeed, the restaurant was a Hungarian/Thai establishment. The juxtaposition was exceedingly confusing, but Sherlock decided not to question it. He ordered some pad thai (John ordered paprikash) and they sat down in the nearly-deserted dining room.

He cleared his throat. “I’m glad you suggested this,” he said. “The sightseeing, I mean.”

John looked up. “Really?”

“Yes. I’ve enjoyed it. I rarely explore the cities where I film. I’m afraid I tend towards the hermit while I’m working.”
“So do I, but I fight it. You need something else in your life besides the work. If you immerse yourself in this business too deeply, you forget that the rest of the world exists.”

His words made Sherlock remember a point of John’s history. “What was it like being in the Army?”

John thought a moment. “It was comforting.”

“That strikes me as an odd description.”

“No doubt. I don’t know how many others would agree with it. But for me, it was dependable meals and a place to sleep. And I never had to worry about what to do or where to go, because someone was always right there to tell me. Usually at a shout.”

“You could have gone career if you hadn’t been shot. In the thigh, am I right? You came very close to bleeding out. You could have re-enlisted after you recovered, but you’d started school and decided to stick with it.”

John nodded. “Correct on all counts.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Sherlock, your ability to immediately know everything about me at a glance stopped surprising me weeks ago.” He smiled. “In fact, I’ve rather been waiting for you to ask me about Sarah. I’m sure you knew it almost as soon as I did.”

“For once, I opted to hold my tongue. I thought you’d tell me yourself if you wanted to.”

“We’ll be announcing our breakup once this shoot wraps.”

“Hmm. Is it possible to break up with someone you were never dating?”

“I know. It’s ridiculous. Bit of a sock puppet theater.”

“It served a practical purpose, inane though that purpose might be. She was able to remain closeted, and you had a relationship that made no demands on you.”

“Didn’t have the perks of a real relationship, either.”

“Oh, John. Don’t tell me that you couldn’t have gone out and found casual sex apart from your ‘relationship’ with Sarah if you’d wished to do so.”

He sighed. “I suppose you’re right. I don’t know why, but it always just seems like so much bother.”

“On that we are in complete agreement.”

Their food arrived and they ate in silence for a few moments. John swallowed and took a swig of his beer. “So, what made you decide to become an actor? I don’t think I’ve ever heard. You’re so brilliant, you could have been anything. A scientist or a writer, or some sort of walking think tank. The way you deduce things, did you ever think of being – I don’t know, a detective of some kind?”

“Oh, yes. In fact I might have been, had things been different.”

“What happened?”

Sherlock hesitated. This wasn’t something he shared readily. Not even Sally knew about this. And yet, the decision to tell John was not difficult. “When I was a child, twelve or so years old, a young
man died in a pool. Carl Powers was his name. He came for a swimming competition and drowned, out of nowhere. I thought it was suspicious. I had my reasons. None of the police ever paid me the slightest mind. Just a kid with an overactive imagination. I kept bothering the detective on the case and finally he just had at me. Told me to find another hobby, join the drama club or something.” He shook his head. “Like it was a passing fancy. Well, the next day I went to the library to research how Carl might have come to drown. I passed a sign in the hall that pointed to where a drama club was in fact meeting, just then. It caught my attention. I suppose I was just feeling contrary and wanted to see how ridiculous a notion it was, me in a drama club. So I went to the meeting, more or less to prove that it wasn’t for me. And to my shock, I found myself entranced by it.”

John nodded sagely. “Fate intervened.”

“I don’t believe in fate. But sometimes I wonder where I’d be today if I hadn’t seen the sign, or decided to ignore it.”

“Well, you’d not be here with me, that’s for certain.”

Sherlock looked across the table at his friend, and the thought of having missed his company was surprisingly upsetting. “Then perhaps things turned out for the best.”

John beamed at him. “I think they have. For both of us.”

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MetaNotes for Chapter 5:

1. James Lipton is the host of a popular show, “Inside the Actor’s Studio,” hosted at the New School in New York. It's an hour-long show in which he brings out one actor and they have an in-depth discussion about their background and career. He’s a wee bit pretentious.
2. RSC = Royal Shakespeare Company
3. The story about Ed Norton is true. The talk about his performance in Primal Fear was so enthusiastic that before the film opened, he’d been cast in Everyone Says I Love You and The People Vs. Larry Flynt.
4. John and Sherlock’s tour of Toronto incorporates real-life places (though I was last there three years ago, I can’t guarantee everything’s still there). “The Hungary Thai” was previously featured by me in my Criminal Minds fic “How to Fight Loneliness” although I transplanted it to DC, so I couldn’t resist using it here since this story is taking place in its actual location.

Contest Announcement!

One of the most fun things about this story has been coming up with fake films to populate John and Sherlock’s past filmographies. So I thought you all might like to get in on it, too! Fanartist Marie and I are hosting a little contest to come up with more fake films.

We will pick two winners, one for John and one for Sherlock. Each winner will get incorporated into the story, and best of all, have their fake film rendered in movie-poster form by Marie!

Here’s what to do:

1. Submit your film ideas to my Ask box on my Tumble.
2. Include the film’s title, co-star(s) and a brief(!) description.

Deadline is Friday.

Remember that John has made a lot of mid-list comedies of any and all varieties, and probably done some ensemble dramas as well. Sherlock has made a lot of high-brow, intellectual films, but
remember he’s scorned period dramas. Have at it!
“Who’s got the limes?”

“Right here,” Anderson said, pulling out a carrier bag and handing it to Harry. She took it and got out a knife to carve them into handy gin-and-tonic sized wedges.

“You want some wine?” Sally asked her.

Harry did. She wanted some wine very, very badly. She glanced over at Clara, who was watching her with understanding, supportive eyes. “No,” she said, with a sigh. “I don’t drink. I’m in recovery.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right. You didn’t know.” Clara smiled at her, then leaned over and kissed her neck. Harry blushed, still getting used to it. Just a week and she’d never been this smitten in her life.

Sally pulled the pizzas out of the oven. “God, I love take-and-bake,” she said. “I know it isn’t any better than delivery but it just feels like you might be cooking, after a fashion.”

“Do you cook at all?” Anderson asked.

“God, no. The extent of my culinary abilities extends to pouring cereal in a bowl and putting milk on it.”

“It’s a bit of a hobby of mine.”

“Cooking? Yeah?”

“When I’m not on a set. Which is hardly ever.” The four of them sat down at Clara’s table. She had the nicest flat, and this dinnertime confab had become a semi-regular occurrence.

“Is the set being closed for tomorrow?” Harry asked.

Clara nodded. “Absolutely. I’m afraid that’ll include you and Sally. Essential crew only.”

Sally waved a hand. “I’ve seen enough of Sherlock naked for a lifetime.”

“Is John nervous?” Clara asked.

Harry shrugged. “He doesn’t seem nervous. He’s done sex scenes before.”

“Not ones like this. All his have been soft-focus and romantic, without much nudity.”

“I suppose. Sherlock’s had a few that were pretty hard-core.”

“He is certainly not shy about being naked on film,” Anderson said.

“With a body like that, he shouldn’t be,” Clara said. “I just thought they might be more nervous than
usual, because…” Everyone looked at her blankly. “You know.”

“Know what?” Anderson said.

Clara sighed. “I know there’s an unofficial agreement that nobody says it, but it’s just us here.”

Sally shook her head. “If nobody’s said it yet then I don’t think one of us ought to be the first.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “John’s my brother. I won’t share in speculation or betray his personal confidence. Not that there is any to betray, because he has told me nothing.”

“I understand what you guys are saying, but the crew’s all squirrely about them shooting this scene with everybody knowing and nobody talking.”

“Everybody doesn’t know,” Anderson said, quietly.

“What do you mean?”

He looked up. “They don’t know. Or they don’t want to know.”

Everyone went silent for a moment, considering this. “My brother saved my life,” Harry said. “He saved our whole family. If it weren’t for him – I don’t know where I’d be, where any of us would be. I just want him to be happy. He deserves to be happy.”

“I’ve never seen Sherlock like this,” Sally said. “I’ve never seen him this – content. This excited about work, about sodding life. He’s always been a little out of context, like he didn’t quite fit. But not here. Not now.”

Clara sighed. “Listen, I’ve been an AD for a long time, and the first thing you learn is not to get all up in people’s business, especially the actors. But I’m telling you guys, just between us, that if we wrap this film and all go our separate ways and those two have not admitted that they are mad in love with each other, I cannot be held responsible for my actions.”

Walking around a film set in nothing but a flesh-colored thong, even with a dressing-gown over the top, is something John didn’t think anybody ever got used to. For one, it was a ridiculous thing to wear that didn’t hide a damned thing and more than once he’d thought that he’d just prefer to be totally naked. For another, the idea of preserving one’s modesty when you were about to writhe all over another man similarly (un)clothed was barmy at best.

To make matters worse, he and Sherlock had both spent the morning talking to the behind-the-scenes crew, stockpiling interview footage for the video release. He’d been asked yet again about filming sex scenes, was it awkward, this one’s with another man, what do you think about that, and so forth. How could he explain that it wasn’t the fake sex that was awkward, it was the damned choreography?

If the interviewer had known the nature of the sex scene they were about to film, he’d no doubt have had more questions. This would be, bar none, the most explicit sex scene between two men ever filmed for a mainstream release. It wouldn’t earn them an NC-17 rating, but it was definitely edging into Basic Instinct territory. The point of it wasn’t prurience, but character. Benjamin and Mark had been through hell with each other by this point in the story. Benjamin’s professional life was in shambles. Mark was estranged from his family, and all they had left was each other, and even that was disintegrating. They knew it. It wouldn’t be enough, they wouldn’t be enough, and much as they loved each other, Mark was too raw from James’s death and Benjamin barely knew who he was
anymore if his medical life was taken away. It wasn’t their time. And this was their last hurrah. It was first angry, then rough, then apologetic, then sorrowful, then comforting, then passionate in rapid succession. It was their whole relationship in a nutshell and it was a bridge from before to after.

People asked the strangest questions about sex scenes. Did men get erections? Well, he’d heard of it happening, but it had never happened to him. It was hard to get a stiffy when you were concentrating on about eight other things at once, namely where you were touching your co-star, what angle you were to the camera, where your light was, how this position of your leg was going to look, if you were giving the right emotion on your face, and if this moan or this noise was going to sound stupid.

John was thinking of all these things, but foremost in his mind right now was the fact that after they shot this scene, he wouldn’t see Sherlock for almost two weeks. They’d come to the point in the story where Benjamin and Mark separate for a year, with Benjamin taking a job in Africa at an aid hospital. Sherlock and a second unit crew would be flying there to do location shooting while John stayed here with the primary unit to shoot Mark’s scenes.

This morning, the actor who’d be playing Mark’s new boyfriend had arrived on set. John had met him just once, at the read-through. He was handsome and a bit geeky and quirky and he was definitely not Sherlock. Sherlock, who’d return to film their last scene together, a whopper of a ten-pager that would probably take two days to shoot.

And then they’d wrap this film and go on about their lives. John was trying not to think about that too much. He’d stay in touch with Sherlock, of course he would. They’d become – well, friends hardly described it anymore. And he’d probably see him at ADR, and when publicity started the nature of the film all but guaranteed that they’d be doing all their interviews together.

But it wouldn’t be the same. It would never be the same. He knew this from experience. He’d made close friends on film sets before, but the making of a film was a time of highly concentrated togetherness, of high emotions and grand surges of adrenaline, all of which served to bond you to people intensely while you were inside it. But the minute you left that cocoon, it all faded away. You’d promise to keep in touch, and sometimes you did, and it was always a joy to see those people at parties or premieres or awards shows, but that soul-deep connection that came from the shared experience of creative work was gone, never to be reclaimed.

The thought of that happening to him and Sherlock made him feel vaguely ill, but he didn’t know how to stop it.

He could tell that Sherlock had walked up behind him, because he could feel the man’s body heat. “Once more unto the breach,” he said, the deep baritone slithering past John’s ear.

“Lead on, MacDuff.”

Sherlock chuckled. “It’ll be fine.”

“You’re the expert. This is a bit new to me.”

Clara came over. “We’re ready for you, guys.”

“Give us a minute?” Sherlock said.

“Sure.” She walked away again. The set had been closed, there were no more than a dozen people there. Ang, and the DP, the focus-puller, Clara, and a few other crew members. John stood just out of camera range, psyching himself up.

“Do you trust me, John?” Sherlock said.
“Yes.”

“I’ve got this trick. It’s worked before. Nothing untoward.”

“Go ahead.”

Sherlock’s hands pulled at John’s dressing-gown; he unbelted it and took it off, tossing it to a nearby chair. He could feel that Sherlock was already naked behind him. “Just stay still and relax.”

“Okay.”

And then – Sherlock hugged him. From behind, his arms around John’s chest, their bodies pressed together from shoulders to thighs. John gave a bit of a start, but then remembered he was supposed to relax. Sherlock didn’t move. John let himself calm down, let the tension bleed away with the warmth of Sherlock’s body.

After a few moments, he realized what this was. It was acclimatization. If they walked onto that set separately, it’d be an uphill slog, but if they connected in a chaste but physical way beforehand, they’d start the scene as a unit.

*We’re in this together.*

He lifted his hands and hung on to Sherlock’s forearms, and while his defenses were down, the thought came to him unbidden that he didn’t want Sherlock to leave, not tomorrow and not at the end of the shoot, he didn’t want him to leave, ever, not unless John could go with him.

Sally had packed his bags for him, so Sherlock spent the evening unpacking and repacking them. He heard John’s key in his door, but just kept on with what he was doing. Something to occupy his hands and his brain so he wouldn’t have to think about leaving was an absolute necessity right now.

“What are you doing? I thought Sally packed for you.” John leaned in the doorway, a bemused look on his face.

“Precisely why you see me occupied thusly, as she cannot properly back a bag to save her life. I don’t know why she insists on doing it when she knows I’m going to re-do it.”

“You are a mass of neuroses, aren’t you?”

“Says the man who alphabetizes his DVDs.”

“That’s not a neurosis, that’s just good organization.” John came in and sat on the end of the bed.

“When’s your flight?”

“Seven in the morning.”

“Long trip.”

“Not looking forward to it.”

“Neither am I.”

Sherlock lifted his eyes and met John’s. What he saw there made him quickly return his attention to his suitcase. “Surely it’ll be a relief to be rid of me and all my self-important arrogance for two weeks.”
“No. It won’t.”
He sighed. “Come on, John. Work with me. I can’t maintain my flippant nonchalance if you insist on being all -- truthful.”

“Oh, sorry. Well, in that case, I certainly won’t miss your nicotine patches everywhere.”

“That’s better.” A thought struck him and he smirked. “Although, I will enjoy one tremendous benefit by being out of the country.”

“Dysentery?”
“I won’t have to look at or smell another sodding hydrangea for two whole weeks.”
John groaned. “Oh, you lucky bastard. You think Ang would buy it if I told him I’ve developed an allergy?”

“He’ll just tell you to take some Benadryl and square up.”
John chuckled, then went quiet. Sherlock carefully folded his shirts and tucked them into the case.

“My new co-star came on set today.”
Sherlock nodded. “I saw him. Don’t think I’m familiar with him.”

“He’s on an American telly programme. Something funny, I haven’t seen it.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, he seems like a nice enough chap. It’s going to be strange, though. I’m going to feel as though I’m cheating on you.”

“How dare you act with someone else? I thought we had something special, John.”
He laughed. “I promise I won’t feed him lines, all right? It’s just a job, it means nothing.”

And they were both laughing, and kidding each other while Sherlock packed, and it was horrible. Sherlock packed as slowly as humanly possible, as if time would slow down to match his pace and seven a.m. would never come.

John fidgeted a little on the bed. “This might sound gross, but I feel a bit – raw.”

“Well, six hours’ rubbing will do that to you. I had a co-star once called it ‘thrash rash.’”

“I’ve never had to deal with stubble-burn before,” he said, rubbing at his face. “And not just on my face.”

“There’s a cream, and there’s also this fantastic powder that...”

“I know, Harry got me some.” He looked up at him. “You were really something today. I don’t think you need any more lessons in intuitive acting from the Oracle of Watson here.”

“I owe it to you. I could only do it because I knew you were there in it with me.”

“Well, that was the intent, wasn’t it?”

Reluctantly, Sherlock shut his case and zipped it. He put his hands in his pockets with a sigh. “I’m
beholden to you, John. I really am. You’ve enabled me to take some risks that I’d been avoiding, without knowing I was avoiding them.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” John said, softly. “You don’t know what it’s meant to me to act with you. Especially in this film. To get to tell this story, and to do it with someone like you…” He cleared his throat and cut his eyes away. “I’d given up on having a chance like this as an actor.”

Sherlock stared at John’s profile, knocked completely off his internal equilibrium by this man and his humility, his utter ignorance of how extraordinary he was. Sherlock wished he could find the words to tell him, every day, a hundred times a day, that not only was he a great actor but he was an amazing human being, something Sherlock had never been nor ever tried to be. But he might try now, if it would keep John at his side.

“Well,” he said. “Sally’s coming for me at five. It’s getting late.”

“I’ve got tomorrow off. Adam’s got some fittings and they’re shooting some of Emma’s scenes. I could…” John cut himself off. “No, it’s silly.’

“What?”

John looked up at him. “I could wait with you. We could watch some films, or play cards or something.”

Sherlock knew that he shouldn’t. He should try and get some rest. But would he be able to rest, knowing that on the other side of his dreams was a plane that would bear him far away from this man?

Oh, who was he kidding, anyway? Given a choice between sleep and more time with John, no choice was required. “All right, then,” he said. “You pick the first film.”

Armed with the largest latte they’d make her at the all-night coffee shop (eight shots, the barista had double and triple checked that order), Sally made her way to Sherlock’s flat, balancing the drink, her purse, and Sherlock’s travel kit with his key in her teeth. She got to the door, managed to get the key into the lock, and quietly opened it.

The light was still on. Oh God, the bastard hasn’t slept. He’ll be a delight on the plane. She set down the coffee and went into the lounge, preparing a diatribe against pre-trip all-nighters, but stopped short when she beheld the sight before her. The TV was on, showing the DVD menu of There Will Be Blood, the sound muted. Sherlock and John were sitting on the couch, both asleep, leaning up against each other, the heads lolling back against the couch, tilted together. John’s legs were curled under him, Sherlock’s were stretched out and propped on an ottoman. A bowl of popcorn was in John’s lap. Sally couldn’t help but smile at the cuteness. She couldn’t resist. She got out her mobile and snapped a photo. Then she leaned in close and nudged them both. “Sherlock? John?”

John snapped awake at once, blinking in confusion. Sherlock’s eyes flickered open and he sat up. “Oh good Lord,” he muttered. “Is it five?”

“Yes. Time to go. Are you done re-packing your suitcase?”
“It’s in the bedroom.” He rubbed a hand through his hair. Sally went in and got his case. When she came back, John and Sherlock were both on their feet, stretching, studiously not looking at each other. “Are you ready to go? Do you want to change?” Sherlock was wearing slacks and a turtleneck, which wouldn’t be atypical travel attire for him, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask.

“No, I’m ready.” He turned to John. “Well, I’ll see you in a couple of weeks. Best of luck with your scenes.”

“You as well,” John said, shaking his hand. “I’ll look forward to the dailies. Try not to get dysentery.”

Sherlock smiled. “I’ll do my best to avoid it.” Sally watched them, eyes narrowed, as they exchanged what could only be called standard hey-we’re-mates farewells. “We’re off, then. See you soon.”

“Right you are. Safe trip.” John lifted a hand as they left Sherlock’s flat. Sherlock shut the door behind them and took a breath.

“You all right?” she said.

“Yes, of course I’m all right. Let’s go.” He took his suitcase handle from her and they headed off down the hall. Sally didn’t remark on it, but Sherlock had his hand stuffed in his pocket, his shoulders hunched like he was warding off a blow.

_Oh, you men. You are all so stupid._

_Film Shoot: Week Seven_

John trudged to his trailer after the day’s filming wrapped. He hated the fact that some of the joy had gone out of this for him. It shouldn’t matter who was here and who wasn’t here, what mattered was the script and the story and his character, Mark, who was trying to move on after the twin devastations of his brother’s suicide and the loss of the man he’d fallen in love with. Helping him move on was the new man he met, Roland, who was considerate and handsome and just not Benjamin.

“John? John!”

He stopped and turned to find Adam, his new short-term co-star, jogging up to him. “Yes?”

“Can I ask you about tomorrow’s scene, in the coffee shop?”

“Sure. Come on in.” He went into his trailer and held the door for Adam, who was very nice and very talented and who he irrationally hated down to the core of his being. Not that Adam would ever know this, because John Watson was a good actor. He was just having to do more acting offscreen these days than was the norm.

He spent the next half hour discussing the scene, running a few lines, making a few jokes, because that’s what co-stars did. That’s what actors did when they were giving and generous to their fellows, and John Watson was nothing if not giving and generous, and none of this was Adam’s fault, he was just a man trying to do a job. He was an actor on a successful telly program who was taking a small part in this film for its profile and its director, and John respected that.

Four days. Four days until Sherlock comes back. He had to stop himself from thinking, until Sherlock comes home. This wasn’t home. It was a film crew. It was a production. An ephemeral gathering of people and circumstances to produce something that would exist only as light projected
on a screen.

*Home. I want him to come home. Home is with me.*

“Well, thanks,” Adam said, closing up his battered script. “I appreciate the time.”

“No worries,” John said.

“I, uh – I’m sorry I’m not going to get to meet Sherlock.”

John looked up. Hearing the name come out of Adam’s mouth was inexplicably jarring. “Yeah, I guess he won’t be back until after you’ve wrapped.”

“What’s he like to work with? I’ve heard some stories, I don’t mind telling you.”

*He’s transcendental. He’s transforming. He’s so consuming that I honestly can’t remember ever having worked with another actor, ever. They all become him in my memories. He’s every character in every novel and every script and every imagining. He’s my entire goddamned world and it’s ending in eight days. He’s really amazing,” John said. ‘He’s demanding, but it’s worth it. I think we’ve both done some of our best work on this film.’*

“I can’t wait to see the finished product.”

On that, John could agree. “I know. Neither can I.”

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**Film Shoot: Week Eight**

John woke up on the second-to-last day of the shoot to find Sherlock making breakfast in his kitchen. His heart leapt at the sight of him, but all he could do was mutter a sleepy “Whatthefuck?”

“Ah! Good morning,” Sherlock said, smiling brightly. “Better hurry, we’re on-set in an hour.”

“When – when did you get back?”

“Oh, late last night.”

“Why didn’t you come wake me up?”

“I was rather catastrophically jet-lagged and barely made it past my couch. But never mind, all is mended with some coffee. Here,” he said, pushing a cup across the breakfast bar toward John.

He sat down and took it, rubbing his face. “You were supposed to be back yesterday,” he said, trying not to sound like a petulant child denied a favorite toy. In fact, the extra day had felt like punishment. Adam had wrapped all their scenes on schedule and Sherlock’s delay had pushed things back so John had spent an entire day doing pick-ups and inserts and worrying that something had gone wrong.

“I know. Some sort of bureaucratic snafu. Anderson sorted it. I have to admit, he is an irritating tossrer but he gets things done.”

“Are you going to be all right to film? Aren’t you tired? This is a marathon of a scene.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.” He finally stopped moving and leaned over the bar, looking right into John’s eyes. “It’s good to see you,” he said, a bit quieter.
John smiled, warmed all over. “I missed you,” he replied. Sherlock’s eyes twinkled a bit. “How was Africa? The dailies looked amazing.”

“Oh, you know. Everything takes three times as long. Almost two weeks for ten sodding scenes. But it’s going to look fantastic.” He came around the bar and took the coffee cup from John’s hand, pulled him off the chair and spun him around. “Go. Into the shower with you. I can’t wait to sink our collective teeth into this scene.”

The scene was hard. Easily the hardest scene John had ever played in his career. Benjamin reappearing on Mark’s doorstep after a full year away, the polite greetings, the suppressed emotions, the long exchanges of how’ve-you-been and what-have-you-been-doing, the gradual erosion of civility until it got down to the meat of it. Benjamin hoping for a second chance. Mark wanting to give it to him but involved with Roland. The still-raw edges of their wounds, the healing incomplete. Finally the surrender, the desperate kisses, the almost-sex and then the restraint, the withdrawal.

And then, the agreement. Someday. We will be together someday. When our time comes, and it will come, and we will live our lives until then and we’ll know when it’s time.

It was a lot of dialogue. It was a lot of body language. It was a lot of moving in the space, the space of Mark’s flat, Benjamin taking up too much literal and emotional real estate and Mark clinging to his fragile stability.

The schedule was for two full days, but as the work went on it became clear that they’d only need a day and a half, because John and Sherlock were blazing. Full conflagration. Everyone step back and just watch, because this is how it’s done. Cuts were rarely called for. There’d be a lot of long takes in this scene, and it would be something to behold. Ang had scheduled a Steadicam although it hadn’t been planned to be used in this scene; halfway through the first day he began to use it, shooting long, sweeping moving takes that moved between them, the camera operator dancing around them as they railed at each other, comforted each other, kissed and stalked and walked circles and tested each other.

This wasn’t the last scene of the film. The final shot would be of Benjamin alone, on a plane, on his way back to Africa, at peace with the closure he’d gotten with Mark and their promise to each other. That shot had already been filmed during Sherlock’s African location shoot. This was the final scene to be filmed for the production. John was absurdly pleased that he and Sherlock would wrap simultaneously, and neither would have to stay behind to shoot additional scenes.

On the morning of the final day of shooting, John and Sherlock had breakfast together in his trailer. Two more pages and they were finished. “When do you start rehearsals for the play?”

“Monday.”

“Oh, that soon?”

Sherlock nodded, then braced himself a little. “I’m flying out tonight.” He avoided John’s eyes as he said this.

John’s stomach dropped. “Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought…” John trailed off. What did you think, exactly? Did you think that you and Sherlock would have this last night to spend together, without the pressure of the shoot? That you’d go out on the town, have a nice dinner, maybe take a walk, and bare your souls to each other? That he’d turn
to you and tell you that he wants you to come with him back to London? Or that he’s pulling out of the play so that he can stay here with you? Did you think that you’d have a cinematic moment of confession, where you’d finally find the perfect moment when the planets would align and it would somehow become okay for you to tell him the truth? Be realistic, John. Nothing like that was going to happen, no matter when he left the country.

He looked up and saw Sherlock’s eyes, his sad eyes, and he knew that not only was that exactly what he hoped was going to happen, but it was exactly what Sherlock had been hoping for, too.

“I thought you weren’t planning on leaving until tomorrow.”

“That was the plan, yes. Unfortunately my brother is rather insisting that I spend a few days at the family home. My mother’s been asking for me, apparently. So he changed my travel arrangements without consulting me.”

“Your brother? I didn’t know you had one.’

“It’s not a topic I care to visit with any regularity. Mycroft is seven years my senior and a colossal pain in my arse.”

“What’s he do, then?”

Sherlock sniffed derisively. “He’d say that he occupies a minor position in the British government. You’d be better off not knowing what he really does.”

“Well. That’s – I’m sorry to hear that. I was rather looking forward to – I don’t know. Having dinner or something. Last night and all that.”

“I know,” Sherlock said, sadly. “I was, too. I shall have to leave right from the set and got to the airport. Sally has my bags already in the car.”

John grit his teeth together, staring down at his hateful half-finished breakfast. “Dammit, Sherlock, I – I don’t know – there are things…”

“John. It’s all fine.”

He met Sherlock’s eyes again, and despite the man’s words, it wasn’t fine. It was far from fine.

Benjamin went to the door. He opened it and turned back, smiling at Mark with tears in his eyes. “Someday,” he said.

Mark nodded, his fists clenched. “Someday.” And then, Benjamin was gone.

Mark reached behind him and found a chair, folding into it as the breath left his body. He let his head drop into his hands and took a deep, shuddery breath, then tipped his head back into the light streaming in from the skylight, glinting off the wet streaks on his face. He smiled, then laughed.

“Cut.”

John sat up straight, shaking it off.

Clara looked at Ang, who gave her the nod. She came onto the set, beaming. “John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, finished on the film,” she called out. “And that is a wrap, ladies and gentlemen.”

Sherlock burst back into the flat, smiling. The whole crew was clapping and hollering and hooting.
He didn’t look at them or acknowledge their cheers, he just strode straight for John and seized him in a tight hug. John hugged him back, his arms wrapped around that slender body, tears tickling the back of this throat.

He would have stood there forever, Sherlock in his arms, but the crew were swarming around them, wanting to shake their hands, congratulate them, and soon they were separated and John lost track of him. Ang came up to embrace him. “You will change lives,” he said, quietly. “And no one will see you the same again.”

John sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

The handshakes and hugs and exchanges of promises to keep in touch seemed to go on forever. “You’ll be seeing more of me, I think,” Clara said, winking at him.

“Oh, could you mean because you’re sleeping with my sister?” John said, grinning.

“If that’s all right with you.”

“I think it’s brilliant, and you’re brilliant, and everything is just – brilliant.” He was quite overcome with the outpouring of love and camaraderie, but his mind was still fixed on one thing.

Clara pulled him close and whispered in his ear. “Sally’s got their car down by the production vehicles. You’ve got about half an hour before they leave.” She pulled back and John saw in her eyes that she knew, and that probably everyone on the whole damn crew knew.

For the next twenty minutes, it was as if the world was conspiring to keep him away from Sherlock. Eager crew members wanted him to sign their books, various production staff needed things back from him, needed his signature, needed God knows what and he didn’t care, he just wanted to be left alone so he could run after Sherlock like any of the rom-com heroes he’d played over the last ten years.

When he finally broke away, he hurried toward the vehicles, craning his neck to look for Sherlock’s tall, dark-haired head. He didn’t see him anywhere. He knew where Sally would have parked their car, but when he got there, it was gone.

No. Oh, no. I can’t take this. If I get nothing else you’ve got to give me the chance to say...

“You didn’t think I’d leave without saying goodbye, did you?”

He whirled around, gasping, to find Sherlock standing behind him. “Holy fuck!”

He smirked. “Elegantly put as always. I had Sally move the car around to the corner so we wouldn’t get caught up in the mass exodus.”

John relaxed, smiling. “I thought you’d gone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. As if I’d just up and leave.”

Now that he had him here, John didn’t know what to say. “Well – best of luck with the play. I’m sure you’ll be brilliant.”

Sherlock sighed. “It’ll be nice to be back in London. I never have gotten used to California. Dreadful place.”

“I miss London, too.”
“Perhaps…” Sherlock cleared his throat, looking away. “Perhaps you could come visit, if you’ve got time.”

“I’d like that. Time could be a problem. I’ve got a few days off and then it’s back to work. I’m doing a voice for a Pixar feature, and I’m shooting a few guest spots. I’m sure Mike will have me hopping.”

“Well, if nothing else, I’ll see you when the publicity starts.”

“It might be bearable if we tackle it together.”

“No offense, John, but not even your esteemed company could make publicity tours bearable.”

They laughed, and then silence fell. John stood there staring at Sherlock’s shoes. Say something. He looked up. Sherlock was waiting for him to start. Could he? It was a powerfully tall cliff with no bottom in sight.

“Well, break a leg,” he said, lamely.

Sherlock nodded, withdrawing slightly. “It’ll be a good production. Mostly sold out already, I hear. Good luck with the Sarah situation.”

“Oh, right,” John said. He’d all but forgotten about it, but soon they’d be announcing their break-up.

“Sherlock!” Sally called, from around the corner. She pointed at her watch.

Sherlock gave her a nod, then turned back to John. “I’d best be off.”

“All right.”

They just stood there staring at each other.

I can’t say it.

Neither can I.

It’s too scary.

I’m petrified.

It’ll go away. We’ll get over it.

We’ll work. A lot of work. It’ll pass.

I can’t do it. I’m sorry.

It’s not right. I’m sorry, too.

John held out his hand. “It’s been – really, an honor, Sherlock. One of the best acting experiences of my life. Thank you.”

Sherlock took his hand and shook it. “It’s been my privilege, John. Please keep in touch.”

“I will. You do the same.”

They hung on to each other’s hands for a beat, then released. John’s hand felt cold at once, as if the warmth of Sherlock’s grip had immediately become its new preferred state, and the absence of it was
a bitter denial.

Sherlock turned and walked toward Sally, his shoulders hunching a bit.

_Oh God, I can’t._ “Sherlock!”

He stopped and turned.

And John opened his mouth, then shut it again, and could only raise a hand. Sherlock raised his in answer, then turned and kept walking. He disappeared around the corner with Sally.

John stood there until he saw their car disappear down the street. He slumped against the side of a nearby van, the strength gone out of his legs. Someone was talking to him but he didn’t care who it was, he didn’t hear them.

____________________

Sherlock stared out the window of the plane and watched Toronto diminish until the broke through the clouds and then he saw nothing but white. Sally was quiet in the seat next to him. He could hear her fingers on her BlackBerry, sending emails, making contacts, verifying things on his behalf.

Sherlock just stared. Stared out at the unrelenting whiteness, the blazing bright of the sky, the blue of it undimmed by moisture, blurry now with his own.

Sally touched his arm. He looked at her, one tear escaping to roll down his cheek. Her eyes were full of sympathy. “I know,” she whispered. “I know it hurts.”

He let his eyes fall shut. He slumped to the side and Sally caught him with one arm around his shoulders. She pulled his head down and was blessedly silent, saying nothing as a patch of wetness darkened her shirt beneath his face.
Chapter 7

Sally came into Sherlock’s dressing room as he was taking off his makeup. “All right?” she said.

He glanced at her in the mirror. “I don’t know.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Is it normal for rehearsals to go this smoothly? Everyone knows their lines, everyone’s professional and cooperative, Alan just sits in the audience and says ‘brilliant’ once in awhile. I know it’s been some time since my last stage experience, but I don’t recall theater being this – easy.”

“You’ve gotten used to Hollywood histrionics.”

“Perhaps.” Sherlock sighed, looking at himself in the mirror. “Even my co-stars are agreeable. For the first time in my professional career, there’s no one in the cast whom I’d cheerfully murder.”

“I suppose we have to call that progress,” Sally said, taking a seat in the one chair in the room. “You do know why they’re all so amiable, don’t you?”

“Enlighten me.”

“You’re the big draw here, Sherlock. They’re all on best behavior lest they provoke one of your legendary tantrums. They’re just hoping for some mention of their own performances when the public and the critics troop through this theater to see you.”

“Hmm.” He hardly cared. And for all that he’d been excited about this production, too. Now it just seemed so hollow.

Sally hesitated. “Have you heard from John?”

The name hit him like a slap in the face. “What? No. I didn’t expect to. He’s busy. We all are.”

“You could write him, you know. Send him an email. There’s nothing to say you can’t stay in touch.”

“Of course not. We can type out meaningless messages about our projects and the tabloids and his fake breakup and my West End revival and the bloody weather.” He threw his flannel to the counter. “I cannot exchange emails with John Watson.”

“Sherlock…”

“No, Sally. I am aware that you’re trying to help, but please, stay out of it.”

“I can’t!” she exclaimed. “My staying-out-of-it got all used up while you were crying on my shoulder all the way here from Toronto!”

Sherlock rounded on her. “I don’t wish to discuss the matter!”
“No, why should you? It might actually help things if you did! Or if you, oh I don’t know, talked to the man! But no, you can’t talk about it, because then you might lose your drama-queen bragging rights.”

“No, I am not having this conversation with you. No, I take that back, this isn’t even a conversation at all! I am trying to prepare for this play, I can’t afford distractions.” He stood up and started stuffing things into his bag.

Sally got to her feet. “Fair warning, Sherlock. I am not going to be able to muster much sympathy for you if you do nothing but sit on your duff, pining for him and feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I have no intention of pining for anyone. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not be talking to you right now.”

“Fine.” She stomped out of the dressing room, letting the door smack shut behind her.

“Sally, I am not having this conversation with you. No, I take that back, this isn’t even a conversation at all! I am trying to prepare for this play, I can’t afford distractions.” He stood up and started stuffing things into his bag.

Sherlock stood up again, packing up his things with morose resignation. Tomorrow night the play would open, and there’d be the thrill of the performance, the rush of the audience’s response, the (hopefully) enthusiastic admiration of the critics, and all this would be behind him.

“John?”

John pushed the remnants of his salad back and forth on the plate, making little swirly shapes with his raspberry vinaigrette dressing.

“John!”

“Huh?” he looked up. Mike was watching him, expectantly. John realized with embarrassment that he’d completely tuned out of the conversation. “Sorry, Mike, I’m sorry. Out woolgathering.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You’ve seemed a bit off since you got back from Toronto.”

“Just tired, I suppose. It was an exhausting shoot.”

“Did you see the notices of Sherlock’s play?”

John nodded. He’d looked them up the first thing Saturday after the play had opened. The critics were falling all over themselves finding new and exciting superlatives to lavish all over Sherlock’s performance. The other actors in the production were getting high marks as well, but it was clear that Sherlock was the star of this particular revival.
He’d stared at the accompanying photo to one of the reviews, a shot of Sherlock in costume as Dan. He was so beautiful that it made John’s skin ache. He pushed the thought away, hard. It wasn’t helping. “I knew he’d be good,” was all he said.

Mike pushed his plate away and laced his fingers together on the table, in what John recognized as his “time to talk serious” pose. “John, I’m your agent but I’m also your friend. So what I’m about to say comes from both sides, got it?”

“All right.”

“There are rumors. I’m getting calls.”

“What sorts of rumors?”

“That something happened between you and Sherlock during the shoot.”

“Define ‘something.’”

“John, don’t be difficult. You know what I’m getting at.”

“Yes, I do, and I’m amazed that you’d fall for it. We were playing a gay couple. Did you think there wouldn’t be people who’d read all sorts of things into what comes down to a performance?”

“So – it isn’t true, then?”

John sighed. “Mike, nothing happened between me and Sherlock on that set.” This had the benefit of being the truth, but it still felt like a lie. “I won’t deny that we became close friends. We worked together so much, it was that or kill each other.”

Mike nodded, and he looked undeniably relieved. What if I’d said it was true, Mike? What if I’d said that we’d had a steamy affair and had spent every hour that we weren’t filming having mad crazy sex? What then? Would you dump me as a client? Would my scripts dry up? Would I have to write off my whole career? Would I be the butt of late-night talk show jokes for eternity? He was afraid to ask, because he was quite sure he knew the answer.

Mike was ready to move on, having been satisfied by John’s denial and knowing better than to ask any more probing questions. “Well, that was the rough bit. Now the good news. There’s more than just rumors coming off that shoot. There’s also buzz. Strong buzz. A lot of talk’s going around about the performances, especially yours.”

“Is that so?”

“I had a casting director call me and tell me that she’d heard that your performance in this film was going to blow the doors off the theaters.”

“Well, casting directors do love their hyperbole.”

“I’ve had three scripts submitted in the last week. Serious films, good films. Not a rom com in the bunch. In two of them, you’d be the male lead.”

“I don’t want to think about new projects right now, Mike. It’ll be a month for these three ‘Mentalist’ episodes and it isn’t going to be an easy shoot. Then most of July will be taken up with the Pixar voice recordings, and before we know it, it’ll be time for press for To a Stranger. I don’t want to be on a shoot and trying to juggle the press tour. I talked to Focus’s head of publicity, she’s got the crazy eyes for this film. It’s going to be an onslaught.”
Mike sighed. “All right, but can I at least send you these scripts? Just have a look, there’s a good chap.”

“No promises.”

“You miss him, don’t you?”

John’s head snapped up. He looked for an insinuation or an unspoken assumption behind Mike’s words, but saw none. An innocent question. “I suppose so, yeah.”

“Have you kept in touch, then?”

“God, no. I don’t want to bother him. He’s got this play going, and he’s not much for email to begin with. Last thing he wants is to have to try and make electronic small talk with me.” John idly twirled his fork back and forth in one hand, the tines tapping against the plate.

He’d thought of emailing Sherlock, but was oddly reluctant. It wasn’t just that he didn’t want to bother him. It was that he could envision too clearly how it would go.

It would start out enthusiastic. How’ve you been, play’s going great, shooting a guest-starring arc on a telly programme, seems like yesterday we were in Toronto, remember when and how about that time and gosh it was a blast.

The daily mails would become every-other-day mails, then once-a-week mails. The heartfelt chats would become perfunctory small talk. Eventually there’d be the inevitable “well, best of luck, see you sometime” email and that would be that. And he couldn’t bear it. He couldn’t stand to let what he and Sherlock shared in Toronto devolve predictably from a deep connection into a superficial one, and eventually to none at all. He’d rather never speak to Sherlock again and hold what they’d had safe in his heart than let it spin away into nothingness because he couldn’t let go. He wanted no part of it. He would place Sherlock into a bubble and seal him tight away, down deep where no one else could touch him, and there he’d stay, no matter what happened this fall or next year or for the rest of his life.

He glanced up at Mike, wondering how much of this was playing out on his face. Mike looked sympathetic, but clueless. “Well, it sounds like you managed to at least work well with him, which is more than most of his co-stars can say,” Mike said. “That alone ought to get you an Oscar!”

John chuckled. “You’ve no idea.”

“Holmes.”

“Sherlock, it’s Jim.”

“Hello, Jim. How’s the editing going?”

“Really well. Ought to have a rough cut by the end of June. Andrew’s coming along on the scoring. He’s never scored a film before, so it’s a bit of steep learning curve, but I’ve heard some of his early arrangements. It’s amazing stuff.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I’m calling because we’re starting to firm up the publicity schedule. Should I run this through Sally, or through Greg Lestrade?”
“Go through Sally. I’m not taking any work until after the first of the year, so you won’t need to work around Greg.”

“Very good. Listen, Sherlock – I’m not one for easy praise. But I’ve seen some of the edited sections, and the work you and John did in this film is just astonishing.”

Sherlock sighed. “Thank you. It was a challenge but a pleasure.”

“Your on-screen chemistry with him is – mind-blowing.”

“Something you want to ask me, Jim?”

He cleared his throat. “We’ve gotten some media inquiries. Asking if the rumors are true.”

“Rumors are always true, you know that. Especially when they’re not.”

“We need to be in agreement with how we’re handling this.”

“What needs to be handled, exactly?”

“The studio would like to avoid any unwanted publicity that detracts from the film’s release,” Jim said, smoothly, as if Sherlock had not spoken. “The personal lives of our actors aren’t ours to police, but what does and does not become public knowledge has to be our concern.”

“What is it that you think people will find out? That I managed to make it through a film shoot without alienating my co-star, for once? That’s hardly above-the-fold news.”

“That’s not what’s being said, and you know it.” Yes, he did. Sally was the Zen Master of media gossip, and she kept him well informed. There was a segment of the moviegoing public that was watching the making of this film very closely, and chins were wagging. They were saying that Sherlock and John had a torrid off-screen affair during the shoot. That Sarah Sawyer had dumped John when she found out. That their daringly explicit sex scene hadn’t been fake. That they’d been caught in any of a number of compromising positions all over the set during filming.

“Who are these people?” Sherlock had demanded, after she’d shown him some of the discussions on the fan forums. “Don’t they have – I don’t know, jobs? How do they know so much about the production?”

“They read ‘Variety,’ Sherlock. And the gay community is very plugged into the media, or is that some kind of a surprise to you? The news that someone was finally making a film featuring gay men that wasn’t about being gay, and not just any someone but Ang Lee, starring two Hollywood big names – it was like the second coming. They’ve been watching this very carefully.”

Sherlock had known he lived in a fishbowl. He hadn’t realized that he was sodding Shamu in his giant glass cage.

And now here was Jim, a gay man himself, worried about the effect on the film if it turned out that its costars, neither of whom had been known to be gay before, had fallen into a showmance. “What is it that you’re saying to me, Jim?”

He heard the producer heave a weary sigh. “If you are with John, then as a human being I can be nothing but happy for you. But as the producer of this film, much as I hate it, I have concerns.”
“Then banish those concerns, because John and I are just friends.”

Long pause. “Are you telling me the truth?”

Sherlock shut his eyes for a moment. “Yes. I haven’t actually spoken to John in a month, not since we wrapped.” Saying those words out loud made them seem somehow more true, and more hateful.

“Oh, I see. Well, he’s my next call, so I’ll speak to him myself. We sent the still photo package along, check your email. We’re planning to have a theatrical trailer cut in September.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Sherlock hung up. He went straight to his laptop and opened his email. There was a large zipped file from the production office; he downloaded and extracted it, and then…

Oh.

Picture after picture of him and John, in character on the set. Mid-scene, mid-argument, mid-embrace. One that was sure to be plastered all over the Internet in record time pictured them right on the edge of a passionate kiss. One of him watching John sleep.

No. Not John. Mark. These aren’t photographs of you and John. They’re Benjamin and Mark. Keep it clear in your mind, for God’s sake.

He reached out and touched the tip of his finger to John’s peaceful, sleeping face, but even this image was a lie, because John was only feigning sleep.

John.

My John.

The photograph wasn’t alone. Since Toronto, his whole life was a lie. But there were only two more months to go, and then he would be free, and then the lie could stop.

“…We’ll pick up this scene tomorrow, guys,” said the voice director, sitting in the mixing booth and talking through the intercom. “Wrap for today.”

Rustlings and paper shufflings, but good-natured ones. Five people stuck in a recording booth for eight hours’ straight wasn’t anyone’s idea of a good time, but no one complained. Working for Pixar was like summer camp. John kept waiting for the dark underbelly to show its face and it kept stubbornly refusing to do so. He’d never had as much fun on a job in his life.

Well, almost never.

A lot of the recording was done individually, but schedules had been juggled and beaten into submission and the five principal voice actors had been booked into the studio for a solid week to record some of the more difficult conversational interludes. Five actors of not-insignificant status in one room for eight hours a day for five days straight sounded like a Sartre version of actors’ hell to John, but to his amazement, everyone had checked their egos at the door and, so far, were getting along.

“So, John. My agent tells me we might be seeing you on some podiums next winter,” Kevin said, putting his script pages into his briefcase. Everyone paused and looked up at him.

“Oh, really?” John said, putting on his well-worn self-effacing smile. He prepared himself for some jibes at his expense about how ridiculous such a notion was.
Except Kevin didn’t look like he was winding him up. He looked serious. “Yeah, really. She says that the rough cut of To a Stranger has got a lot of people very excited.”

“One wonders how she saw it.”

“I think she plays golf with somebody at Universal who saw part of it.”

“I just wrapped a film with Mark Ruffalo,” said Amy. “He told me that he really wanted that part, the one you played, John.”

“A lot of people were interested in that film,” Kevin said. “Although I bet a few of them lost interest after Sherlock was cast,” he said, winking at John. Everyone laughed.

John forced a smile. “That’s understandable. It’s not easy to share a screen with someone as talented as he is. Nobody likes to be out-acted.”

Everyone’s laughter faded a bit. “It’s not his talent, it’s his attitude,” Kevin said. “How did you stand it? I heard he nearly drove Haggis into a nervous breakdown.”

“That wasn’t Sherlock’s doing,” John said. “And he’s hardly the only demanding actor in town, is he? How was it working with Tom Cruise, Kevin? Of course no one dares say anything against him. I suppose Sherlock makes himself an easy target by not caring fuck-all what anyone else thinks.”

The other four were exchanging uncertain glances by now. “Tom’s a great guy,” Kevin said, with a tone of rote repetition. “But you couldn’t pay me enough to work with Sherlock Holmes.”

“That’s fine, because I’m sure no one will,” John snapped. “I’d work with him again for free.”

“Really?” Amy said. “I don’t know him, but I do hear he’s hard to handle. You didn’t think so, John?”

John snapped up his satchel and slung it over his shoulder. “Sherlock Holmes is not only the finest actor I’ve ever worked with, he’s the most hardworking. And he’s a fantastic bloke, as anyone would know if they bothered to actually get to know him instead of just assuming that they can’t.”

He went to the door. “See you all tomorrow.”

He heard murmurings in the studio as the door closed behind him. He shut his eyes with a dismayed sigh. Fantastic, Watson. That ought to help quell those rumors. How many people will those four tell that you were defending Sherlock’s honor like a smitten schoolboy?

He could still hear Jim’s cautionary words, delivered weeks ago when he’d called about the publicity schedule. We need this film to stand on its own merits, as a piece of art, because that’s what it is. The last thing anyone wants is for the film itself to be overshadowed by whatever happened off-screen.

He’d assured Jim that nothing had happened off-screen.

“Where is everyone getting this notion that something happened?” he’d moaned to Harry not long after. “Are they just inventing stories out of whole cloth?”

“There is some inventing going on, but it’s hardly out of whole cloth. You and Sherlock did spend nearly every waking minute together on that set. And some of the non-waking minutes.”

“We were working! We were – friends! Since when is that so suspicious? It can’t just be because we were playing lovers.”

“That’s a big part of it. But, John…” She thought for a moment. “You didn’t see yourselves.”
“See ourselves? What do you mean?”

“You didn’t see how you followed him around with your eyes, or how he did the same with you. Or how his smiles weren’t fake when he was smiling at you. You didn’t see how you looked at each other when you thought nobody was paying attention. But someone is always paying attention, luv. You know that. The two of you might be Actors of Your Generation or what have you, but nobody can act all the time. You both showed more than you probably realized.”

He got in his car and headed home. A phone call came through his Bluetooth as he got on the freeway. “What is it, Harry?”

“John, something’s turned up online.”

“What?”

“A photograph of you and Sherlock, with some fans? At Casa Loma?”

“Oh, yes. We did a bit of sightseeing on one of our days off, a few girls asked for autographs and took a photo.”

“Well, one of the girls posted it to Oh No They Didn’t, and now it’s all over the place. The fan forums are going barmy.”

“Barmy? Over a photo of us with some fans? There’s nothing about that to prompt barminess.”

“No, it’s a perfectly innocent photo. It’s the context. You know, an outing to a local tourist spot. They’re all calling it your ‘date.’”

John sighed. “Don’t these people have lives?”

“Everyone needs a hobby.”

“I didn’t sign up to be anybody’s hobby.”

“That isn’t all. A couple of bystanders saw you two out and about that day, there are a few fuzzy mobile pics that were taken.”

“And? What do they show?”

“One of them’s you two walking down a street.”

“Oh, surely not. Not that. Not walking down a street. Oh, the implications.”

“John, I agree it’s blown a bit out of proportion…”

“A bit?”

“But you’re walking rather close and you’ve both got these big smiles on and even I have to agree that you look quite smitten with each other.”

“Next thing you know they’ll be finding coded messages in our neckties.”

“The other photo shows you on one of those boat tours. Again, nothing damning, but the whole day does sort of smell a bit date-ish.”

“It wasn’t a date! It was a couple of mates out seeing the town! When did it become impossible for
two men to be seen together in public without everyone making all sorts of assumptions?”

“When those men are playing lovers, and one of them is notorious for not getting along with anyone, so to see him getting along so well with you – well, you know the press. They’ll make up their own story if there isn’t one to be had.”

“The press is on to this?”

“Not the mainstream press. The blogosphere.”

“Pardon me if I don’t tremble in terror of the almighty blogosphere.”

“You shouldn’t. It’ll pass. You and Sherlock haven’t been in touch since the shoot.”

John’s gut clenched a little bit at that. Just over two months now since he’d seen or heard from Sherlock. He’d waited to stop missing him, to stop wanting contact, for it all to just stop and leave him in peace. He was still waiting. Time seemed not to blunt but instead to sharpen the ache he felt at the separation, and he feared that he might reach a sticking point where something had to be done about it. “No. No, we haven’t.”

He heard Harry sigh. “I wish I could help you, John,” she said.

“You can’t. No one can help me. There’s nothing to be done. It’s a bloody impossible mess and that’s all there is to it. I’ll be fine, no need for you to worry.”

“But I do worry! I worry about you all the time! John…”

“Please, Harry. I just – I can’t, all right?”

“All right. I’ll bring dinner over, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks, that’d be good. See you then.”

“Bye.”

He hung up and refocused on the road. Any hope he had that he and Sherlock might – well, any hope he had at all regarding Sherlock was dwindling rapidly. If there was media attention now, no matter how inconsequential, there’d only be orders of magnitude more once the publicity machine really got humming. They’d never withstand the scrutiny. He couldn’t risk this film. Not now, not when he was poised on the cusp of a new stage of his career. Perhaps, in a year or so, when this film was out of theaters and any awards-season attention had passed and the world’s gaze had shifted elsewhere, perhaps then…

Perhaps by then I’ll have gone mad. That’ll solve everything.

The stage door wasn’t too crowded, perhaps a dozen or so people, several of whom were not at all interested in him but rather in one of his co-stars. Sherlock signed some autographs and spoke to the fans, managing what he hoped was a tolerably friendly demeanor.

He looked up and saw Greg Lestrade waiting for him. Greg nodded to him in acknowledgment. Sherlock finished up with the theatergoers and walked over. “Greg, what are you doing here?” he said, shaking his hand.

“Came to see the show.”
“Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?”

“It was a bit of a last-minute thing, actually. I’m just in town overnight, I didn’t plan to do any business, but the friend I’m staying with had tickets so I couldn’t pass up the opportunity. C’mon, let’s go get a bite.”

They went to one of Sherlock’s favorite pubs, just down the street from his flat. They sat in the back and ordered some pints and grub. “Greg, let’s have it. You’re never anywhere not on business.”

He didn’t answer at first. “I’ve never seen you like that with fans.”

“Like how?”

“Nice.”

“You make me sound like an unrepentant ogre.”

“No. You just usually wouldn’t have time for such nonsense.”

“A man’s not allowed a change of heart about something so trivial?”

“It isn’t trivial to them.”

Sherlock sighed. “If you’re here to harangue me about the rumors, I’ve had it already from plenty of others.”

“I’m not here to harangue you. I’m concerned about you.”

Sherlock frowned. “Concerned? We’ve barely spoken since the show started.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not keeping an eye on you. You’re one of my most important clients, Sherlock. It’s my business to know yours.”

“I see. Spies everywhere, is that it?”

“Nothing so devious. But I know a lot of people and many of them know you. And I’m not the only one who’s concerned.”

“I can’t imagine what behavior of mine is cause for such solicitations. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Fine, yes. Of course you are. You show up, perform, and go home. You don’t talk to anyone. You don’t go out. You’ve refused every invitation you’ve been sent since you’ve been in town. You stay in your flat and keep to yourself. Meanwhile you’re kinder and more considerate of your fans than ever. You’re being exceedingly enigmatic.” He cocked his head. “Or exceedingly depressed.”

Sherlock traced the wet ring of condensation that his glass had left on the tabletop. “It isn’t your job to mollycoddle me, Greg.”

“If I don’t do it, who will? Sally? She’s at her wit’s end.”

“You’ve spoken to her?” he asked, sharply.

“I don’t have to. I’ve had it from Anderson. You know they’re still dating. He used to be an agent with us. We’re in touch.”

“Is there anyone you don’t know?”
Greg met his eyes. “Do I know you, Sherlock? I’m starting to wonder. Have you changed this much? Or was this always you, and that man we all thought we knew was just the armor you wore to face the world?”

“You didn’t bring me here to spout nonsense about my emotional state. Which is none of your business, incidentally. Just ask me what you want to ask me.”

“Are you in love with him?”

Sherlock’s head snapped up. He hadn’t expected Greg to actually ask him so frankly. “Cor, that’s – direct.”

“Are you?”

Sherlock drained the remnants of his pint. “If I were, why do you think I’d tell you?”

“Because we have to formulate a strategy.”

“No. We absolutely do not have to do that. My personal life is not a matter for strategic planning. It is my life and none of yours or the studio’s business.”

“If it affects the financial success of this picture, they’ll make it their business and so I’ll have to make it mine as well.”

“I will retire, Greg. I will hang it all up and go live in a cottage in Sussex before I’ll let my private life be discussed in some committee meeting and subject to a focus group. Bugger their publicity tour, they can market this film without me.”

“You wouldn’t do that. This film means too much to you.”

“Not as much as…” Not as much as he means to me. Nothing means that much. Sherlock shut his mouth with a click of his jaw before anything else could spill out, but he could see by Greg’s face that it was too late. “I am in control of the situation.”

“Maybe that’s the bloody problem. You’re always in control. Always the smartest man in the room, the one who knows everything about everyone, even the things no one wants anyone to know. Welcome to the other side of the fence, Sherlock. How’s it feel?”

Sherlock stood up and fished in his wallet for cash. “I’ve got two weeks left on this run, Greg. After that, I intend to take myself away and not tell anyone where I’ve gone, particularly you. Is that understood?”

“What good will that do, Sherlock?” Greg asked, quietly.

Of course, Sherlock couldn’t answer that question truthfully. It will depend on how John reacts when I show up on his doorstep, Greg. Formulate a strategy for that, why don’t you?

“Hello?”

“Hey, Sally.”

“Harry, hi. I thought you were going to call last week.”

“Got busy.”
“Literally?” Sally said, snickering. “Was Clara in town?”

“As a matter of fact, she was, but that isn’t what I meant. How are things?”

“Bloody awful. Mine’s miserable.”

“Mine’s miserable, too.”

They were quiet for a moment. “Why are men such idiots?”

“I don’t know. Must be in their DNA. I was using John’s laptop the other day to send some emails. You would not believe how many pictures of Sherlock he’s got saved to his hard drive. Photoshoots, publicity stills, red carpet, everything.”

“Sherlock’s been having a bit of a film festival.”

“Oh no, he’s not…”

“He is. Every single one.”

“Even Havana Honeymoon?”

“Even that one. I think now he’s watched all the films, so he’s down to digging up YouTube clips of John on talk shows. He even found grainy video of John in some community-theater production of The Importance of Being Earnest.”

“And yet they can’t pick up a bloody phone or send an email.”

“Well, this is safe, of course. You don’t risk anything when you just cyberstalk each other.”

Harry sighed. “What’s Sherlock got scheduled after the show closes?”

“Nothing. He’s got some time off.”

“Hmm.”

“What is going on in your devious little brain?”

“Just pondering how we might be the best enablers we can be.”

“I’m not interfering.”

“Neither am I. Not directly. But there’s nothing to say we can’t do what’s in our power to do and make it – easier.”

“Keep talking.”

Harry was awakened by the pounding on the door of her flat. She rolled over and peered at the clock – five a.m. Fuck.

She got up and stumbled to the door, where the pounding had resumed. “I’m coming, all right?” She opened the door and there was John, a bit wild-eyed. “Christ, you couldn’t have just rung me?”

He pushed past her and into the flat. “Tell me I’m not a nutter.”

“If you didn’t want to seem like a nutter, you shouldn’t have pounded down my door at five o’clock
in the fucking morning.”

“Tell me that I’m a sane, level-headed man and that there’s absolutely no possibility that I’m considering getting on a plane and flying to London to make some sort of third-act declaration.”

“Stop talking about your life like it’s a screenplay. Sit the fuck down, will you?” She pushed John into a chair and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on the hob. “I’m going to make you some tea.”

“I don’t want tea. I want you to stop me from doing something colossally stupid.”

“Colossally stupid is when you turn down a part in an Oliver Stone film to film Robin’s Egg Blues.”

“I am never going to live that down, am I?”

She sat down facing him and grabbed his hands. “I’m saying there’s colossally stupid, and then there’s finally getting up the stones to tell that toff bastard how you feel about him, and those two circles do not overlap in your little Venn diagram of life, Johnny.”

John’s head dropped down, shaking back and forth as if he were just saying ‘no’ to the world. “I can’t do this.”

“John,” she said. “Look at me.” He lifted his head and met her eyes. “I have watched you all summer, and you’re killing me here, you are bloody killing me. You put on a happy face and go about your work and your life and you take care of me and everyone you know, but you are dying inside and I can’t take it. I’ve stood by and I’ve seen your heart break a little more every day and I’m done in, luv. Aren’t you? Aren’t you tired?”

He sighed, his eyes closing. “I’m so tired, Harry.”

“Then stop. Just stop.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Yes, you do.” She held his gaze.

A smile crept onto his lips, a grim little smile of resolve. “How fast can you get me to London?”

Harry grinned and let his hands go. She stood up and went to her desk, pulling out the itinerary she’d put together last week. She handed him the envelope. “You leave this afternoon. I’ve got you a hotel room at the Savoy.”

He took the envelope, staring up at her in amazement. “How did you…”

“His show closes tomorrow night. I know you actors. You love a dramatic statement. And I have it from a reliable source that he’ll be taking a holiday after the show and faffing off to parts unknown. So you better hurry.”

John jumped up and hugged her. “You’re the best sister in the world.”

She smiled and hugged him back. “Just evening the scales up a bit, luv.”

Closing night always had the melancholy of finality. If the show had been a good experience, it bore the additional sadness of separation, from the show, the audiences, the cast and crew, and the life you’d led for months while performing it.
But for Sherlock Holmes, waiting backstage to take his curtain call, his run in this role now finished, all this closing night brought him was relief and anxiety. The show had held him here, it had forced him into this cocoon of self-preservation. He’d told Greg that he intended to take himself away, but he hadn’t told him where.

In his dressing room was a packed bag and a plane ticket to Los Angeles. The moment his indenture to this production had expired, he was going to go to the airport, board a plane, fly to Los Angeles and take a cab right to John’s door.

What he’d do then, he had no idea. But he and John had never had difficulty communicating before. Something would come to him.

The applause was thunderous. He walked out with his co-stars and it redoubled in strength. They took a group bow, then each an individual bow, then another group bow. Exeunt, stage left. Pause, pause, pause. Take the stage again for another round of bows.

And here was the stage manager with the requisite bouquets of roses. She handed them to his co-stars as they took another solo bow, each receiving a healthy ovation from the crowd. Sherlock was last. She handed him his bouquet, winking at him as she did so. The crowd’s applause swelled, shouts and whistles floating toward him. On another night, at another time, this would have been like a drug to him. A high that no narcotic could match. This was what he lived for. The work. The proof of their adulation making it clear, once again, that he was the best.

But right now, he couldn’t hear them. He couldn’t see them. He didn’t care. Everything had faded to white noise and a vague blur.

All Sherlock could see was the single hydrangea that was stuck in amidst the roses in his arms.

*John.*

John was here. He was here, somewhere. Sherlock looked around, but of course he couldn’t see a damn thing with the stage lights in his face. His co-star grabbed his hand and they bowed again. Bow, bow, bow…where was he? Was he out there right now, applauding? Was he waiting? Would he leave?

*He’s not going to leave, he came here to see you. You were going to him, but he beat you to it, because he is just that infuriating and just that wonderful.*

The curtain came down again. That would do it for curtain calls. The house lights came up and he heard the audience murmuring as they collected their bags and jackets. Sherlock raced offstage into the wings, the bouquet clutched in his hand, forgotten. He pushed through startled crewmembers and extras, ignoring their congratulations, leaving puzzled faces in his wake.

*John. John. Where is he?*

He ran to the stage door and poked his head out. A few fans, but no John. He ducked back inside before the fans realized it was him. He ran back to the steps that led up to the house and took them two at a time. The audience was clearing out; nobody was lingering, nobody was coming down toward the stage, nobody who looked like John was anywhere in sight.

*Think. Where would he be?*

The hydrangea had to have been sorted ahead of time. He must have been here before the show. Did he watch the show? Regardless, he had an in among the crew. Sally was the most likely person to assist him. She’d have brought him through the stage door and stashed him somewhere. Where?
The answer came to him before he’d barely finished asking himself the question. He whirled around and ran for his dressing room.

He stopped in front of the door, paralyzed, his hand reaching for the doorknob. Was John behind this door? This was not the plan. The plan had been for him, Sherlock, to fly to John. This was logical, as John had work in Los Angeles and Sherlock was now free and unencumbered. That John would decide to come here to see him on the same night that Sherlock had planned to leave the country to go to him was somewhat predictable. They’d both known that the play closed tonight, which provided a handy jumping-off point, not to mention a certain element of drama, which being actors they were both sadly susceptible to.

Open the damn door.

He knew why he was hesitating. If he opened this door and John wasn’t behind it…

He opened the door.

John was standing at his mirror, looking at several clippings Sally had taped to it. He turned around when he heard the door open.

Sherlock shut and locked the door and leaned against it, the bouquet of flowers falling from his hand, unnoticed. He was afraid to move or blink or speak lest John vanish like a mirage, a product of his frustrated imaginings. Lord knew he’d spent enough time conjuring John’s image in his mind.

John was as still as a statue. He was wearing a well-cut gray suit and a pink button-up open at the throat. He looked glorious and tanned (arrived last night staying at the Savoy spent the day revisiting his old neighborhood also visited his parents had dinner with his cousin the one who’s a cardiologist) and Sherlock lost the air from his lungs, the words from his throat, the pulse from his heart and the sense from his mind, all of it replaced with the fact of John, John here in this room, John before him, John everywhere.

I’m here.

You’re here.

A slow smile dawned on John’s face. Sherlock felt his own face mirroring it, his shoulders sagging as John’s body relaxed, and of all the first words he’d ever imagined John saying to him, he’d never predicted that there’d be none at all.

The dressing room was small. They required only one step to reach each other. It had been a step too large to take in Toronto and now it was the work of less than a second, so easy, so natural, the most intuitive thing in the world, reach forward and surround him, let himself be engulfed, the motion sweeping them together so their mouths locked and the breath rushed in, the pulse surged back, and the imaginings had been nothing but the thinnest shadows of what the reality now proved to be.

John.

His lips were soft and insistent; they parted beneath Sherlock’s and they dove into each other, all their restraint long ago exhausted, weeks of restraint, months of it, terrible and draining and so futile. John’s arms moved restlessly over his back like he was searching for a way to hold him tighter and Sherlock wished he could, wished himself smaller so he could be enfolded entire. He cupped John’s face to draw him closer, this endlessly fascinating face, locked against his own as if carved to fit, John’s warm mouth and his tongue and his breath hot on Sherlock’s cheeks.

He held John’s head still and pressed kisses to his lips, his cheeks, down his jaw and onto his neck,
ducking to press his face under John’s chin, John’s hand sliding up into his hair, but it wasn’t enough, he needed to be shorter, he needed to be closer. He slid down within the tight circle of John’s arms until his knees hit the floor and he could bury his face in John’s stomach, feel his warmth through his clothes, clutch his arms around John’s hips and feel himself held close, his skull cradled by John’s hand and he could finally breathe, just breathe, long tidal breaths that drew up the deepest unspoken wishes from the bottom of his lungs and let them dissipate in the air.

He felt John press his face against the top of his head. “Sherlock…” he began.

“Shhh. Please, John, just…” Just hold me. Hold me until I get used to how it feels, hold me until I’ll be able to remember it after you’ve stopped. Don’t let go of me because I am terrified of needing this and I never knew that I did because no one ever has, no one until you, because you were the only one who’d know how.

“Okay,” John whispered, his arms tightening around Sherlock’s shoulders as he pressed gentle kisses along his forehead and temples, the only part of him that John could reach at the moment.

They just stayed there, breathing together while their new reality settled around them. One minute, two, three, the seconds ticked by and Sherlock could hear the chaos of the closing-night backstage crowd outside his dressing room door. He’d eventually have to rejoin the world, and he wondered how long he could put it off.

Finally satisfied that he wasn’t about to burst into flames, or wake up alone in bed, or find himself clutching the air where John had never been, Sherlock turned his face in toward John’s body and sighed. John’s hand carded through his hair, soothing and patient. He disengaged just enough to get to his feet, their eyes meeting in a shared, bemused moment of well, that happened. Now what?

John grinned. “What does one say after a greeting like that?”

Sherlock chuckled. “I don’t know. Although, we never actually did say hello.”

John’s smile faded. He lifted one hand and brushed an errant curl off Sherlock’s temple with his index finger. “Hello,” he whispered.

He tipped forward until their foreheads met. “Hello, John.” He waited for three breaths’ worth of silence, then nudged at John’s face with his own and kissed him again, slow and deliberate. John cupped his neck and kissed back, working Sherlock’s mouth gently with his own.

When they separated again it felt like something had been decided. He didn’t know what, exactly, but something had. John sighed. “I wish we’d done this in Toronto. Spared ourselves three months’ hand-wringing. At least, I know I’ve had some hand-wringing.”

“Sally characterizes what I’ve been doing as pining.”

John smiled. “Pining? For me?”

“No, for Cate Blanchett. Of course, for you, you daft git.”

He flushed to the tips of his ears, and Sherlock felt his heart lurch to one side. Oh God, I am really in for it. John looked down and fidgeted a little. “Well, at least we can stop doing that.”

“Indeed.” He slid his arms around John’s waist. They fit so comfortably together like this, it was hard to believe it wasn’t by design. “But you know why we didn’t do this in Toronto.”

John nodded. “I’ve seen a hundred showmances start on the set and then fizzle out in the real world.
I knew that there was – something, but I couldn’t stand for that to happen to us. Best to let some time go by and make sure – well, that it’s real.”

“And is it? Is it real?”

John met his eyes. “God, yes.”

The sudden surge between them took Sherlock by surprise, and he barely had time to blink before they were kissing again, this time with urgency and need and want, so much want, bottled up for too long and needing out, needing to fly, needing to burn. Their arms wound tight round each other, John rising on his tiptoes to press closer. He kissed and sucked at Sherlock’s neck, tiny little noises escaping him that went straight to Sherlock’s groin. He slid his hands down John’s back to his arse and pulled him closer. “John,” he whispered.

“I wanted this,” John murmured against his skin. “I wanted this with you, all the time.”

Sherlock was having trouble marshaling coherent thought. It was a novel and not entirely comfortable sensation. He seized John’s face and kissed him, deep and fast, it was all he could think to do and all he seemed to want to do, apart from all the other things he could imagine doing that John might let him do.

But they were in a dressing room in the middle of a busy backstage and it was really most inconvenient. He pressed two hard kisses to John’s mouth, then pulled back. “John, much as I’d rather stay here and kiss you all night, I can’t. I have to go back out there and do stage door and then I’m more or less obligated to at least make an appearance at the after party.”

John nodded. “I shouldn’t come with you. In fact, we should try and make sure no one sees me leave.” Their eyes met and Sherlock saw that John had been getting it with both barrels from his team about the rumors, just like he had.

This was going to get complicated, and quickly. But that was for later consideration. All he cared about right now was getting himself free of his obligations and getting John into his bed, as fast as possible. He smiled, his heart doing that odd lurching thing again. “I can’t believe you came here,” he said.

John smiled back, but then it faded away and his brow creased. “What if I hadn’t?”

Sherlock stepped away and went to his bag; he pulled out his itinerary and handed it to John. He opened it up and read it, eyes widening. He looked up at Sherlock, his mouth opening in surprise. “I was going to go to you. Tonight, after I was finished here. I was going to go right from the airport to your doorstep and ask you if you’d mind very much if I took you to bed.”

John’s lips were doing an odd thing; it looked like he wanted to smile, but another expression was fighting for the real estate. “I don’t mind. Not at all. In fact, I’ll be rather cross with you if you don’t.”

Sherlock rummaged in his bag again and came out with his spare key. “Here,” he said, handing it to John. “Do you know where I live?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get Sally, she’ll smuggle you out so the stage door fans don’t see you. Go to my flat and wait for me there. I’ll try not to be too long, you know how it goes.”

“Of course. I’ll just snoop through all your things to kill the time,” John said, smirking.
Sherlock laughed. “Snoop away. The most incriminating thing you’ll find is a complete collection of the films of John Watson.”

John’s face went slack. “You watched them all?”

“Every last one.”

“And you still want to be with me?”

“Consider it a measure of my devotion.” He slung one arm around John’s shoulders and kissed his temple. “They were helpful. They kept me from missing you too badly.” John sagged into him with a sigh. “Well – that’s not entirely accurate. Nothing could have kept me from missing you.”

“I missed you, too. Every day.”

“I’d better get changed. I hate that I have to go out there now and talk to people and act like I don’t have a John Watson waiting for me at my flat.”

John looked up at him, hooking one finger under his lapel, his lip curled in a flirt. “It’ll be worth it.”

“Oh, God,” Sherlock sighed.

John kissed him, a quick kiss of more-to-come. “I’ll just go and find Sally then, shall I?”

“Better let me text her, she’ll come here and collect you.”

“All right.”

“John, you’d…” He chuckled. “You’d better take some of this,” he said, holding out his cold cream and a flannel.


“Because you have my stage makeup all over your face.”

Chapter End Notes

MetaNotes for Chapter 7

1. Where John and Sherlock’s agents are concerned, I’ve done a bit of conflating of the roles of agent, manager and publicist. Actors of their stature would surely have one of each and the things that Mike and Greg each say to them would probably more likely be handled by either their manager or their publicist. I wanted to keep the number of characters manageable so I’ve done a bit of poetic-license amalgamation.
2. The two named actors in John’s Pixar voice recording session are meant to be Kevin Pollak and Amy Adams.
3. The comment about coded messages in neckties is a big of a fandom in-joke, referring to a particularly batshit cray branch of fans who imagined a real-life slash pairing between Elijah Wood and Dominic Monaghan. At one point these fans actually did have theories about coded messages in neckties. Ah, fandom.
THANK YOU to everyone who submitted ideas for fake films! I got tons of really fantastic suggestions. Marie and I are determining the winners and they will appear in future chapters. I will probably post some more of my favorites here and to Tumblr.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I have made a bit of an alteration to John’s timeline. In chapter 2 John says that he was in Altman’s *Short Cuts*. Unfortunately that film was made in 1993, which is too early in John’s personal timeline to be realistic, so I’ve changed the Altman film that John appeared in to *Gosford Park* which has the additional advantage of having a nearly all-British cast.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8

John stared out the window of the cab as it bore him back to his hotel, barely registering his surroundings. He was floating and euphoric and he felt like a teenager. He lifted his fingers to his mouth, still feeling the ghosts of Sherlock’s lips, the grip of his arms around him. He smiled to himself, his heart full to bursting, because it was a rare and precious thing when something worked out exactly as you’d hoped.

He got out his mobile. He couldn’t forget to text Harry, to whom he owed quite a debt for having helped to make this possible.

*One hell of a good first snog.*

She texted back a few minutes later. *Text me when it’s the first shag.*

He laughed. The driver dropped him at the Savoy and John bounded out, trotted through the lobby and up to his room.

Sherlock had watched him clean the makeup off his face. “You’ve got a bit on your suit, too, but I don’t suppose that can be helped,” he’d said.

“Nobody will notice. Anyhow, I’m just going back to the hotel.”

“You may as well check out. Bring your bags back to my flat.”

John had eyed him, one eyebrow raised. “Oh, yes?”

“John, if you think I’m going to let you sleep somewhere that I am not, you’re mad.”

So now he tossed his clothes back into his suitcase, gathered up his belongings as fast as possible and took a quick look round before running out again. He didn’t know why he was hurrying. Sherlock would no doubt be at least a couple of hours, there was no rush. But he was so keyed up that he didn’t think he could have been casual about anything just now.

He stopped by the front desk and checked out, then ran outside and hailed a cab. “Where to?” the cabbie asked.

John couldn’t stop smiling. “221B Baker Street, please.”
By the time Sally got back from helping John make his escape, Sherlock had removed his makeup and was changing out of his costume. “Saw him off, then,” she said. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well? How did it go?”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” he said, eyeing her reflection in the mirror, but his eyes had that aren’t-I-a-devil expression that she knew and dreaded.

“Sherlock, I swear to God…”

“I don’t know if this is relevant to whatever you’re asking about, but you might be interested to know that I think it might now be said that John and I are -- more than friends.”

She smiled. “Thank God. It’s about damned time.”

“I’m sure I don’t have to impress on you the need for discretion.”

“Of course not.”

“How many at the stage door tonight?”

“Couple of dozen. Make it quick, we’ll be off to the after party.”

Sherlock tied his tie and straightened up, brushing off his jacket. “I intensely don’t want to do this. John will be waiting for me at my flat. I’d much rather be there with him.”

“I’ve phoned down to Sussex to have the caretaker open up the house and get it ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Don’t be coy. Are you or are you not going to take John out to country for a bit?”

Sherlock sighed. “The thought had occurred.”

“Then you’ll be wanting the house prepared.”

“What would I do without you, Sally?” Sherlock handed her his coat and bag. “All right. The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can leave.”

Sherlock’s building was a tall column of flats, Victorian and posh, right round the corner from Regent’s Park. John took a cautious look up and down the street, hating that he had to, but it wouldn’t do for some random photographer to snap him going into Sherlock’s building, let alone with a suitcase. He didn’t see anyone. He paid the cabbie, got out and hurried across the pavement. A doorman appeared out of nowhere and opened the door for him, ushering him into the lobby. “Are you Mr. Watson?” he asked.

John blinked, surprised. “Um, yes, I am.”

“Mr. Holmes phoned ahead that you were expected.” He pointed across the elaborate parquet floor to a lift. “He’s on the second floor, then. Up you go.”

“Thank you,” John said. He boarded the lift. There were five flats, apparently, A through E. He pushed the button for B.
The lift doors opened directly into the flat. John stepped out, dragging his suitcase, his mouth hanging open. The flat was large and expansive, taking up the entire second floor of the building with one massive room. Carved wooden columns two feet thick broke up the space. He’d have thought that someone as meticulous as Sherlock would have an immaculate flat with everything just so, but it was cozily Bohemian, full of squashy furniture and oddball prints on the exposed brick walls and tattered Persian rugs. Books were everywhere, and a large flat-screen telly was shoved into the corner like an afterthought. There was a tidy, darkened kitchen in one corner and half-walls in another sectioning off a bedroom.

John wandered in and sat down on a couch that seemed to be Sherlock’s favorite place to sit, based on the amount of notebooks and scripts and empty teacups that were nearby. He leaned back and smiled, relaxing for the first time all evening. The high ceilings, exposed beams and ducts, and the dim lighting made the flat feel like a womb, a haven.

This is where he lives and breathes and sleeps and showers and reads and works, John thought. This is the home of my…um, my…

He didn’t know how to refer to Sherlock in his own mind now. He’d been sticking grimly to the friend-colleague-mate genera of tags, but now his mind was rocketing off down the boyfriend-lover-partner branches of the linguistic tree. Redefining his terms wasn’t all his mind was up to, giddy in its new freedom to indulge its late-night imaginings. Every mundane fantasy he’d ever had about Sherlock was running rampant over his thoughts now that he could let them all loose. Fantasies about Sunday mornings in bed and trips abroad and dinners with friends and trading scripts back and forth. He’d imagined a thousand ordinary, day-to-day things he could do with Sherlock and had suppressed every one of them, and the idea that now he didn’t have to do that anymore was making him a little light-headed. Just the idea of being here in this flat with him, watching telly, cooking dinner, shaving side by side at the mirror – these banal activities seemed seductive and intoxicating when he pictured doing them with Sherlock.

Go ahead and imagine it now, John. Imagine everything, because now it can happen. It can all happen. So he sat there in the dip that Sherlock’s body had worn into this couch, cradled by the shape that he’d left behind, and imagined. He imagined bashing about Paris with Sherlock. He imagined taking him to meet his family. He imagined all sorts of everyday things, all the while still shying away from the thing that most wanted to be imagined.

Imagining sex with Sherlock was something he’d tried very hard to avoid, not entirely successfully. John wasn’t a total stranger to men’s bodies. He’d been in the Army, where sometimes the blokes gave each other a hand, and then spent most of his adult life in the film industry, where men of both orientations were often willing, even eager, to broaden their horizons for a lark. But his experience was limited to oral and manual contact with men, and none of it had been in the context of a romance. He’d just never felt that way toward another man before.

Come to think of it, he’d barely felt that way toward a woman. He’d been single most of his life, although there had been a few relationships now and again, none had lasted more than a year. He’d put it down to the demands of his business (none of the women he’d dated had been actresses, by design), but the truth was that he hadn’t been all that heartbroken to see those relationships end.

Another truth that he’d have to face, and now was as good a time as any to do so, was that he’d never felt about anyone how he felt about Sherlock. And it was puzzling, in the extreme.

Why? Why him, why me? Why now?

They hadn’t had the most auspicious beginning, but from the night he’d confronted Sherlock about the dailies and they’d had it out, something had just clicked. They’d fit together like it was someone’s
idea of a cosmic joke to take two men, so different in so many ways, chisel out a piece of each one’s heart and hide it inside the other, so that when they met, they’d be stuck without knowing why.

He knew it was ridiculous. He knew it was more than just putting the cart before the horse, he was putting the cart out before he’d even gotten to the stable. But he also knew that this wasn’t casual. It wasn’t a fling, or an experiment, or a temporary showmance. This was real, and that excited him and terrified him all at once.

He wasn’t afraid of being physical with a man. He wasn’t even afraid of having to adjust his ideas about his own sexuality. But he was afraid of what it meant, for his career and for Sherlock’s, and what it would mean for them both if it got out. The media attention would be horrific, and people’s lives and relationships had been torn apart by less. He wasn’t afraid of being with Sherlock. He was afraid of everything around them.

He got up and dragged his suitcase into the bedroom. He got out some clean clothes and stripped off his makeup-smeared suit.

_Hmm. Shower._

He went into the adjoining bathroom, which had an attached walk-in closet. As much as the rest of the flat was in homey disarray, the closet was military-neat. The hangars were spaced one inch apart, Sherlock’s suits hanging in regimented rows, his shoes in tidy ranks, his ties hung up on a rotating rack. John smiled, reaching out to touch one of the suitjackets, then went to find a towel.

If he’d hoped to put sexual thoughts out of his head, the shower had been a bad idea. Standing here in the stall, where he knew Sherlock had stood many times, the water running over his nude body just as it ran down John’s now, was absurdly but undeniably arousing. John was tempted to have a wank right here, but decided against it.

He dried off and dressed in jeans and a soft t-shirt, putting his dirty clothes in his wash bag.

_Now what?_

He wanted to have a look round the flat, perhaps even have the snoop that he’d threatened Sherlock he’d have, but honestly, the bed looked too inviting. He was abruptly aware of how tired he was. He’d barely slept the night before, wired from his trip and the prospect of seeing Sherlock, and since then he’d been going on adrenaline. His purpose here achieved and things between them moving forward, the adrenaline was fading, leaving him more than a bit woozy.

The large bed was neatly made. He climbed onto it and stretched out, a groan of near-orgasmic pleasure escaping him at its comfort. He turned on his side and burrowed his head into a pillow.

_I’ll just lie here for a moment. Then I’ll get up and make some tea and dig up some food for when Sherlock gets home._

Sherlock Holmes had never faced a more difficult acting challenge in his life than that of the task before him; namely, to navigate a wrap party full of actors and contributors and patrons and directors and maintain his civil demeanor while simultaneously wishing fervently that all of them would drop dead so he could leave.

Politeness was not something he valued or was particularly inclined to practice, but it was something he’d learned to emulate out of necessity. He’d been forced to accept, early in his career, that his ability to find interesting work was severely curtailed if he did not at least cast a passing glance to cordiality to his colleagues. No one would ever nominate him for the congeniality award, but he’d
learned to put forth a reasonable facsimile when necessary.

After the contracts were signed, that was when all bets were off.

He wished he could just say sod it all and leave, but he couldn’t. There were at least a dozen people in the room whose good graces he wished to maintain, and a dozen more whose good graces were currently in need of a little remedial work on his part. If only one could act in a vacuum, but one could not. It required co-stars and producers and writers and directors and bloody best boy grips. He could not burn his bridges.

Especially not now. Not when the writing was on the wall, his own bloody wall, and looking down the road he knew with grim resignation that he’d soon be needing allies in the business. Not just for his own sake, but for John’s.

John.

He went to the bar for another whiskey sour, taking the few moments’ respite to shut his eyes and imagine John in his flat. Was he sitting on the couch? Making tea in the kitchen? Reading a book, or watching telly? The thought of John there, doing any of these very ordinary things, was surprisingly potent. It was comforting and made him feel warm from his stomach out to his fingertips.

John in his home. John in his life.

He just wanted to be there with him and sit next to him on that couch, or drink the tea he’d made, or watch telly with him. Even if that was all there was to it. His presence worked like a salve on Sherlock’s mind, calming and steadying it, and it was something he’d come to crave in Toronto and had been missing ever since. It had come flowing back at the first sight of John in his dressing room, smiling at him. It was a wave of peace that washed over Sherlock’s entire body and soothed the raw places where the world chafed him.

Armed with his fresh drink, he waded back into the sea of people who represented nothing but a barrier between him and a taxi.

Soon. You’ll be there with him soon. Think of it as a test of your concentration.

Oh, dear. That was a very unhelpful thought. His irritatingly obstinate mind relished nothing more than a challenge, so the moment he framed it as such, it began throwing up more and more distracting thoughts and images to test his concentration even more.

John waiting for me. John in my bathroom, perhaps taking a shower. Oh God, John naked in the shower. John in my bed. John (naked) in my bed. John greeting me at the door with a kiss. John greeting me (naked) at the door with a kiss.

It didn’t stop. It ran on a loop through his mind while he conducted a conversation with a formidable dowager who’d donated a truly staggering amount of money to the National Theater. After she moved on to someone else, he couldn’t have told you what they’d discussed if his life had depended on it, but she had seemed oblivious to his preoccupation.

I am the greatest actor in the world.

“Sherlock!”

He turned around, mustering another passably-pleasant expression, but when he saw who it was, the expression became more genuine. “Thea, how are you?”
They exchanged cheek-kisses. “What’s your schedule like for next summer?” she asked, without preamble.

“I’m holding off for now. Why?”

She shrugged, smiling coyly. “How would you feel about doing some good old deconstructed Shakespeare?”

“I’m intrigued.”

“I thought I might had better mention it now. I’m hearing that you could be very busy come, oh, March or thereabouts.”

“Is that so?”

“Don’t be coy. That film’s being talked up one side and down the other.”

“I rather wish it weren’t. You know how it works with advance buzz. If it gets too histrionic, then all the film can do is fail to live up to its expectations.”

“You going back to the States for publicity?”

“Not until November.”

“I heard you and John got along like a house on fire during the shoot. I imagine it’ll be nice to see him again.”

_I could be seeing John again right now if all you people could manage to let me escape._ “We got on rather well, yes.”

“Good. That’s good.” Thea gave him an understanding smile. “Well, you know the theaters here will always welcome you,” she said. “If you start to get bored of Hollywood.”

Sherlock watched her face, his brain tracking at least a half dozen chains of word of mouth that led from her back to the set of _To a Stranger_. He swallowed hard, looking down at his shoes. “Thea…”

“The play was stunning,” she said, cutting him off. “You were fantastic.”

“Thanks.”

She took a step closer. “I was in Byron’s office when Sally snuck John out the staff door,” she murmured. “What are you still doing here?”

Sherlock took a drink. “Right now, I have no idea.”

“You’ve put in enough time. I’ll cover for you.”

He stared at her, overcome with an abrupt and sudden urge that he couldn’t explain. “Thea, I think – I think I want to hug you.”

She laughed. “Save your hugs for John.” She reached out and plucked the glass from his fingers. “Go. I’ll make your excuses.”

Sherlock seized her shoulders and planted a big, smacking kiss on her cheek. “I’ll call you later, we’ll talk about next summer.” Without waiting for a response, he turned and walked with purpose to the doors. Sally, through whatever mental telepathy she insisted she did not possess despite all
evidence to the contrary, was already there with his coat and bag.

“I’ll hang about for a bit in case people ask after you,” she muttered to him.

“Go talk to Thea so you two aren’t giving different stories as to why I’m gone.”

She patted his arm. “Get some for me.”

“Sorry, Sally. I don’t share.” He winked at her and was out the door.

The cab ride home had never seemed so long. Sherlock drummed his fingers against his knee as the driver navigated the streets. Naturally, they hit every red light and paused for interminable road-crossings by pedestrians. Sherlock knew in his rational mind that this cab ride was no longer nor any more vexing than any other, but the presence of such a long-desired reward at the end of the route made the time stretch in a way surely not allowable by the laws of physics.

Finally there, Sherlock tossed some money at the cabbie and darted inside. He waved to his doorman and got into the lift.

He composed himself during the short ride to his flat. It wouldn’t do to burst in like he’d been shot out of a cannon. It might alarm John, and give the impression that Sherlock was not in control of his faculties right now. He gave himself a shake and took a deep breath, calming his face and straightening his posture.

The lift stopped and he walked into the flat. It was quiet. In fact, it looked as it always looked, but there was a difference. It didn’t feel empty. Logically, he knew that there was no sensory apparatus he possessed that could allow him to sense the presence of another person if he could not see, hear or smell him, therefore the feeling was an illusion based on his previous knowledge that someone was here. Yet the sensation remained, and remained powerful. This flat was not vacant. This flat contained a John.

But where was he?

Sherlock could detect the faint odor of shower soap and the slight tinge of humidity in the air. So John had taken a shower. He glanced into the kitchen, which was dark and deserted. John had obviously sat for a brief time on his couch; several of his papers were disturbed. But he was not there now, nor did Sherlock see his suitcase anywhere.

He walked toward the bathroom, wondering if John were shaving or perhaps in the tub. Such ideas forced certain new and interesting thoughts into his mind.

Thoughts that were abruptly cut off the moment that Sherlock saw John, asleep on his bed.

He was on his side, knees pulled up, one hand curled on the pillow near his cheek. His breathing was even, his face slack and peaceful, and the sight of him tugged at something behind Sherlock’s gut.

Sherlock walked quietly over to the bed and leaned over him. He’d changed into jeans and a t-shirt. His hair was damp and he smelled of Sherlock’s shower soap. His feet were bare. He looked like he belonged here, as if this were his home as well; it was clear that he felt safe here, enough so to let his guard down and sleep in a bed in a flat he’d never set foot in before tonight. Sherlock sat gently on the edge of the bed, hitching his knee up and looking down at this man who was now his – what, exactly? Boyfriend? Lover? Significant other? He didn’t know the appropriate language to describe what they were to each other. This would have to be an item on the agenda. Definition of terms.
Whatever term was correct, its application to his own life was a new and jarring sensation. He’d never had an [insert-term-here], just casual lovers and short affairs that inevitably ended because the other person was too insufferably boring to be tolerated any longer – or because his own failings inevitably outweighed their desire for his secondhand fame, intellectual companionship or physical person. He didn’t know why John seemed to be exempt from any and all previously enacted ordinances regarding suitable partners, but he was. Perhaps all the objections to his previously-attempted partners boiled down to one single objection: not John. He couldn’t be faulted for not recognizing the nature of their inadequacy. He hadn’t known that he was waiting for John. But here he was, at last.

He reached out to touch his shoulder, then hesitated. His hand hovered in midair. He pondered whether it wouldn’t be more considerate to let him sleep. He was probably tired from his trip. Would that not be the nice thing to do, the act of a concerned boyfriend? Then again, he couldn’t speak for John, but he suspected that he had been waiting for this as long as Sherlock had, and he might not look too kindly upon being allowed to sleep through their first night together.

His hand moved again, one finger extending to brush through the fringe over John’s forehead. “John,” he murmured. He let the finger trail down John’s cheek. He felt some tension come into John’s relaxed body and knew that he was waking. “John?”

John sighed, a long susurrus of breath. He shifted on the bed and made a little growly waking-up noise that had an odd effect on Sherlock’s stomach. He blinked and opened his eyes. He looked up at Sherlock and a slow smile spread over his lips. “Hi,” he said, the word draw out to impossible lengths.


John just looked at him for a moment, then his eyes widened. “Oh God, what time is it?”

“It’s just after midnight.”

“Oh, hang it. I only meant to lie down for a moment,” he said, sitting up.

“It’s all right. You must be tired.”

“No, I wanted to make tea and get some food together for when you got home, and I just fell asleep…” He shook his head, as though he’d ruined everything.

“John, I do not require tea or food. Think nothing of it.”

He yawned and stretched, his t-shirt riding up to expose a strip of pale stomach. He ran a hand through his mussed, still-damp hair. “How was the after party?”

“Dreadful. Thank goodness for Thea, she covered for me as I made my escape.”

“She directed you in ‘Hedda Gabler,’ right?”

“Yes.” Sherlock held John’s eyes. “I never enjoy socializing in that sort of context, but tonight it was unbearable. Knowing that you were here waiting for me.”

John leaned forward, biting his lower lip. “I really like your flat.”

“Hmm. I’m not here all that often. My condo in LA is much blander, but unfortunately I’m there most of the time.”
“It feels like you here.” John reached up and put a finger under Sherlock’s chin, drawing him closer.

“I always thought it was missing something.” Sherlock whispered.

“What?” The word was barely a puff of air. John was staring at Sherlock’s lips.

“I don’t know, but I think you may have brought it with you.” He closed the distance and sealed his mouth over John’s, sliding forward on the bed to pull him close. John melted against him and wound his arms around Sherlock’s neck, kissing back with still-sleepy warmth. They shimmied and shifted until they were both sitting on the bed, interlocked like puzzle pieces, learning the shape of each other’s mouths. John filled his arms perfectly; the pleasing weight of him, firm but comfortable, was an anchor that would hold Sherlock here in this moment when his brain would usually have flown away on a dozen different trains of thought.

John drew back a little and pushed Sherlock’s jacket off his shoulders. “Take off your coat and stay awhile,” he said with a wry smile, tossing the jacket onto a nearby chair. He kissed Sherlock’s lips again, twice, then paused and just sat still for a moment, his eyes roaming from Sherlock’s forehead down to his chin. “God, your face,” he murmured. “I could stare at it for hours.”

Sherlock shifted a bit under his scrutiny. “John, I – I think I ought to warn you.”

“Oh oh. This sounds dire.”

“I really have no idea what I’m doing, or how to do any of this.”

“Well, I give you full marks for kiss technique.”

He looked at John’s face, and the thought of disappointing him was a cold lead ball sitting in his stomach. “I’m not known for my skill with relationships.”

“Neither am I.”

“But you get along with people, you’re an easy person to like. I’m – difficult.”

“Are you implying that I am not a man up for a challenge?”

Sherlock sighed. “John, please. I’m trying to have an actual conversation with you about us. Isn’t that what one does?”

John sobered and sat back a little. “All right. I’m sorry.”

“People who’ve tried – this – in the past with me have eventually found me unpleasant.”

“Perhaps they weren’t the right people.”

“Perhaps not. But I find that the mere idea of you coming to a similar conclusion is making me come over a bit wobbly.”

John took hold of his hands. “Sherlock, these other people. Did you care about them?”

“Enough to accept their company.”

“Did you have this conversation with any of them?”

“No. I assumed they knew what they were getting into.”
“Do you…” He saw John swallow hard. “Did you feel about them how you do about me?”

“Not remotely,” he said, trapped in place by John’s gaze.

“And do you think that maybe *that’s* why it didn’t work out? Not only did they probably sense that you didn’t care bugger-all about them, but the relationships weren’t important enough for you to make an effort. And it’s always an effort, Sherlock. I’m not a shining prince of perfection, either. We’ll both be stumbling about in the dark and trying to muddle through.” He sighed. “If we do this, will it be important? Will it be a priority? Will you put in the effort to make it work?”

“I’ll do whatever is necessary.”

John smiled. “Then who bloody cares what happened with other people? I heard someone say once that every relationship you’ll ever have will fail, until one doesn’t. I know we’ve only been together for, oh…” He checked his watch. “A whole four hours now, but this isn’t trivial to me.”

“Nor I.”

“I think we have a shot.”

Sherlock looked into his eyes, impossibly deep blue and full of something he’d never seen before, not directed at him – not when a camera wasn’t rolling. “So do I.”

“Then stop worrying. It’s a bit soon to be looking for reasons this couldn’t possibly work.”

“Agreed.”

“And, well – it’s not exactly the most romantic topic for our first night together, is it?” Sherlock checked John’s expression, but he didn’t look irritated, just bemused.

“I thought it best to be honest and direct. Isn’t that always preferred?”

“Yes, generally. But look, Sherlock – I know you. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. Better than anyone.”

“I know how you are. I’m not asking you to be different for me. I know you can’t, and I wouldn’t want you to. So as long as I’ve got leave to get bloody irritated with you sometimes, you’ve got leave to continue being difficult.”

Hope was rising in Sherlock’s chest, hope for something he hadn’t ever entertained as a realistic possibility: finding someone who accepted him as he was. “I only want you to make an informed decision.”

“The only information I need is that it fucking gutted me to watch you walk away in Toronto, it gutted me some more to be away from you all summer, and right now I’m so bloody chuffed just to be here with you that if you asked me to chuck it all and faff off with you to Iceland, all I’d say is ‘when do we leave?’”

Sherlock smirked. “Iceland?”

“Anywhere. Iceland, Madagascar, Antarctica, Cleveland – you name it.”

“Please, John. Don’t be ridiculous. I’d never ask anyone to accompany me to Cleveland.”

John giggled, delighted trills of mirth, and Sherlock thought that if he could only make John giggle
like that every day of their lives then he’d be doing all right. He lunged forward and pressed John back into the mattress, kissing the laughter out of his mouth. John wrapped his arms around him and twined their legs together, returning Sherlock’s kisses with enthusiasm. He grabbed at Sherlock’s shirt and yanked it out of his trousers, then Sherlock felt his hands, hot and soft, on the bare skin of his back. He growled into John’s mouth and their kisses tipped over from tender and languid to urgent and heated.

The part of Sherlock’s brain that had no interest in such activities floated away, observing with interested detachment how most of his rational centers clicked over into standby and the testosterone-driven male core of him, normally browbeaten into dormancy, surged forward and asserted itself. It watched from a safe distance, fascinated by the potency of the response, of that primitive rutting instinct that took over. It did not seem to matter that the gene-driven urge to couple was irrelevant here, all that mattered was that he had his chosen mate spread beneath him and he wanted to have at him until they both lost consciousness.

John arched up into him and Sherlock could feel his erection beneath his jeans, his own straining against his trousers. He pressed his hips down into John and rocked against him. “Oh God, Sherlock,” John groaned, hitching his leg higher up around Sherlock’s hip.

Sherlock knelt up and pulled John upright with him; they scrubbed at each other’s shirts before giving up and each stripping off their own. John grabbed him and pulled him back down and his warm skin was everywhere. He kissed his way down John’s neck, his lips seeking out the hard throb of John’s pulse. He felt John’s hands slide down his back and quite deliberately grab two handfuls of his arse. He chuckled against John’s throat. “Grabby, are we?”

“You have the most spectacular arse on either side of the pond,” John said. “I have been mad to get my hands on it. God, it feels even better than it looks.” He nudged his face against Sherlock’s until their mouths met again. “If only these fucking trousers weren’t in the way.”

“If you wish them gone, do something about it,” Sherlock murmured, the words snuck in between kisses and gropes. He worked one hand underneath John’s hip and got his own handful of arse. “I certainly intend to.”

John chuckled and moved his hands around to Sherlock’s zipper. Within a few moments they both had each other’s flies undone. John didn’t bother with the rest of it, he just plunged his hand inside and wrapped his fingers around Sherlock’s cock. For a moment Sherlock’s vision went a bit white, like a bright flash had gone off, and he bit his lip. “John…yes, John…”

“Harder,” John groaned. “Sherlock, God…I want to see you come…”

A strangled sort of moan came from Sherlock’s throat, John’s voice setting off a sympathetic resonance in his spine. He brought his hand to his face and licked the palm, then returned it to John’s cock, pulling it in smooth, long strokes, flicking his thumb over the head and relishing each shudder he felt course through John’s body. “You first,” he growled.

John cried out and his body went taut, then he was spilling over Sherlock’s hand. The sound of his orgasm and the motion of his hand, still working on Sherlock, sent him over the edge as well. Sherlock pressed his mouth to John’s shoulder, his teeth set in the ridge of muscle there, and rode out
his own climax with John’s name on his lips, spoken into warm flesh of his throat.

They lay there panting for a moment. “Jesus Christ,” John said, his voice breathy. “We just came in our pants like teenagers.”

“I don’t believe I remember this part of being a teenager,” Sherlock said, not moving from his comfy spot, half on top of John.

John chuckled. “I suppose we are starting a bit from the beginning. Might as well have been in the back seat of my mum’s Ford Anglia.”

Sherlock lifted his head and drew his hand out of John’s pants, surreptitiously wiping it on them as he did. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t what you were expecting,” he said, that knot of anxiety returning.

“Oh God, no! Stop that. Look, I’m rather new at this, too. I’ve gotten off with a few blokes, but…” He sighed and laid his hand on Sherlock’s cheek. “Never really been with one, when it meant something. Never had a lover like this, like you. There’s no rush, is there?”

“None at all.”

“Then let’s not worry. We’ll work up to it. Surely you didn’t think we’d dive in and be rogering each other on the kitchen floor the first time round, did you?”

Sherlock grinned. “Well, I was thinking that the rug in the living room would be more comfortable, but just as you like.”

John laughed out loud. “Come on, you. Let’s get ourselves sorted and perhaps get under the covers.”

They adjourned to the bathroom for a quick wash-up. Sherlock changed into pajama pants, John just put on clean boxers. They went back into the bedroom, hands grasping at each other and lips meeting in small, casual kisses, and climbed in. Sherlock settled against the pillows with a deep sigh. “John, I hope this isn’t too disappointing, but – I’m well knackered.”

“Oh, thank God,” John said, in a rush. “So am I. Jet lag, and I’ve barely slept since I got here. Let’s just get some sleep.” He turned on his side, hands tucked beneath his cheek, and smiled at Sherlock. “You know, just sleeping next to you is pretty brilliant.”

Sherlock lifted a hand and skimmed one finger down John’s cheek. “I usually dislike sleeping. A necessary evil that just keeps me from my work. It might be almost pleasant now, though. I’ll have something to look forward to.”

“What’s that, then? Good dreams?”

“No. When I wake up, you’ll be here.”

John’s face did something unclear that looked like a sort-of smile but also the beginnings of tears. The end result was neither, just a soft expression that made Sherlock’s breath hitch a bit. “Yes. I’ll be here,” He slid closer and kissed him, his hand resting over Sherlock’s heart. Sherlock covered it with his own and kissed back. “Goodnight,” John whispered.

“Goodnight, John.”

John settled against the pillows, turning a few times and tucking the duvet up around his shoulders, and within a few minutes his breathing slowed and deepened, and Sherlock knew he was asleep. He just laid there, staring at the back of John’s head for a moment, marveling that such a thing as John
Watson in his bed could possibly happen.

John snapped awake at seven a.m. He was impossibly warm and comfortable, and he did not wish to be awake, except that if he weren’t, he’d be missing out on the quite extraordinary sensation of Sherlock Holmes snuggled up to him, curled around his back with his arm tucked around John’s waist. He sighed and burrowed back into him a bit. Sherlock’s arm tightened around him and John felt him press his face into the back of John’s neck, then the soft imprints of his lips there. John twined their fingers together on his stomach and turned his head a bit to nuzzle at Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock’s lips worked their way around to the side, then the front of his neck, then John was tipping over onto his back to kiss him properly, both of them exhaling sleepy breaths as their tongues wound around each other, bodies interlacing with far less clothing in the way than they’d had to contend with the night before.

John rolled Sherlock onto his back and kissed down his neck to his chest. His skin was smooth and pale over his leanly-muscled torso; it fluttered under John’s lips as he moved down in the bed. He slipped Sherlock’s pajama pants down and took him in his mouth. He heard Sherlock suck in a sharp breath, then felt his fingers thread through John’s hair, not pulling, just holding. He urged Sherlock’s legs apart and settled his chest between them, lifting one of his legs and hoisting it over his shoulder. Sherlock still said nothing, but a low moaning sound was coming from his throat. John risked a glance upward and saw Sherlock with eyes closed and neck arched, biting that delicious lower lip of his, and the sight was just about enough to make him come without even a hand to himself.

He rolled his hips against the mattress as he worked his mouth up and down Sherlock’s shaft, on and off, alternating open-mouth kisses and long pulls. He had done this before, a few times, but not after sharing a bed with the man in question, waking up with him after a night filled with dreams of him.

Sherlock’s hips bucked and he grunted as he came into John’s mouth; he swallowed him down, a leftover practice from the Army where the lack of a mess had been a priority. Sherlock collapsed, his chest heaving, and John crawled back up his body to press kisses into his throat. He was already drifting off again, which John had expected. Sherlock didn’t like to sleep much while he was working, and he knew that his usual closing-night routine would have involved tipping into bed and not coming out for a few days. He didn’t expect Sherlock to sleep that much this time, but he’d need at least a few more hours. John himself was wide awake. “Go back to sleep,” he whispered in Sherlock’s ear.

“Mmm,” he said, his lips forming a vague kissing motion in John’s general direction. John tucked the duvet back around him and ran a hand through his sleep-mussed curls. He kissed his cheek, spared him one last fond look, then climbed out of bed.

He put on flannel pants and a t-shirt and ambled out to the kitchen. He found it well-stocked and tidy, no doubt thanks to Sally. He put on a pot of coffee; while it brewed, he had a better look round than he’d gotten last night.

Sherlock had what seemed like every book ever written. They were jammed haphazardly into bookshelves, some of which were ornate and carved, others of which looked handmade from slabs of particle board. He had a few framed film posters, one of Hitchcock’s The Lady Vanishes, and one of Sherlock’s own film Out of Noise, the film that had earned his first Oscar nomination and made him an international star, dragging him out of the semi-obscurity of British theater and BBC films.

John had seen it at a preview screening in London. He’d gone with Clive, they’d been filming Gosford Park at the time. He’d sat in the theater and watched the film unfold in stunned astonishment. “Who is that kid?” he’d asked Clive. “I don’t know him.”
“Name’s Sherlock Holmes. I saw him do Hamlet in Stratford last summer. Knocked me on my arse,” Clive had said. “Watch him. He’s going to be huge.”

Sherlock had played no less than a dozen characters in *Out of Noise*, although only one of them was real, and that one never uttered a line of dialogue. It was the story of a bored thirtysomething office worker who passes the same street violinist every day on her way to work. She becomes fascinated with his beautiful playing, and in her mind imagines many different lives and histories for him, fixating on him to the point that it jeopardizes her marriage and her job. Her imaginings played out in the film in short mini-stories, and in each one Sherlock had to play a slightly different version of his actual character. It was a bravura performance, shaded and nuanced, and the film world had sat up and taken notice. His first nomination for Best Actor had been a foregone conclusion, and many still believed he ought to have won. John smiled, wondering what his ten-years-ago self would have thought if someone had told him that in ten years he’d be giving that young man a morning blowjob.

John moved over to the fireplace, a grand river-stone affair with a hammered tin chimney sticking out of the top of it and snaking up through the ceiling. There was a pocketknife stuck through a stack of letters on the mantel next to a skull. John picked it up. “Poor Yorick,” he muttered, laughing at himself for pulling out the very hoariest of hoary old jokes. He put the skull back.

Then he saw it. There on the mantel, behind an oil lantern, stuck in an inconspicuous spot. Sherlock’s Oscar, the one he’d won for *Kanisza*. John stared at it for a moment before picking it up. It didn’t seem real, like perhaps it was a prop or one of those novelty gag gifts. It was real, of course. John had watched Sherlock accept it. He put it back, gingerly, wondering if Sherlock would acquire a new one this year. Even daring to wonder if he might get one of his own, dangerous as such thoughts were.

The coffee done, John made some toast and set himself up at the breakfast bar. He snuck into the bedroom, checking that Sherlock was still asleep, and retrieved his laptop. He booted up and loaded in a few scripts Mike had emailed him, figuring he might as well get some work done.

He was so engrossed that he didn’t realize Sherlock was awake until he felt a pair of arms slide around his shoulders. “Reading those gossip sites again? It’ll rot your brain,” Sherlock said, his voice gravelly with sleep. “I’m reading scripts, thank you very much.”

“Anything good?”

“Maybe, yeah. Mike says that the buzz off *To a Stranger* is strong enough that he’s getting some interest in serious roles for me. Have you been getting the same?”

“I haven’t been looking at new projects. I wanted to concentrate on the play.” John watched as Sherlock walked over to the coffeepot to pour a cup. Sherlock glanced back over his shoulder at him. “Are you staring at my arse?”

John jerked his eyes upwards, barely aware that he had, indeed, been staring at his arse. “Well, I can’t help it, it’s right there.”

Sherlock came back around the breakfast bar and leaned over to kiss John again, on the lips this time. He drew back just an inch or so. “How long can you stay?” he asked.

John sighed. “I’m not sure. I think I’ve got at least a few days.”

“Or even – a week?”
“You’d want me to stay that long?”

“John, if it were up to me, you’d stay forever.”

John smiled, feeling absurdly goofy and warm. “A week is possible.”

“And how do you feel about Sussex?”

“I don’t think I have any strong feelings about Sussex one way or another. Why?”

“I have a house there. It’s not a palace, just a country house, but it’s private. There’s a charming village where one goes for tea and bread and such. I was thinking that we might – well, pop down. Spend some time.”

John just stared. “You – you want me to go away with you? To your country house in Sussex?”

“Yes?” Sherlock said, one eyebrow arching. “You’ve already said you’d go to Antarctica with me, so I didn’t really suspect that Sussex would be right out.”

“No, it’s just – what would we do?”

“Talk? Read? Go for walks? Watch films? Have disgustingly late lie-ins? I don’t know, what do people do on these sorts of holidays?”

“Have as much sex as humanly possible?”

Sherlock blushed and smiled, a bit shyly. “I didn’t want to be the one to suggest it, but I’d be in favor of that, yes.”

John grinned. “That sounds perfect. When can we leave?”

“Whenever we like. Sally will bring my car over when we’re ready to go. I’ll need to pack.”

“Go pack, then! Let’s get the hell out of this town.” The notion of going somewhere that there wouldn’t be photographers lurking around every hedgerow was immensely appealing, and John’s imagination was already showing him enticing images of a cozy country getaway with Sherlock, of whole days spent in bed, of hikes and outdoor sex and the charming local pub.

“Oh, there is something you could do while I pack,” Sherlock said, turning back halfway to the bedroom.

“What’s that?”

“Get those DVDs together. We don’t want to forget the complete works of John Watson for our vacation movie marathon, do we?”

John gasped and threw a sofa pillow at him. “I will murder you where you stand,” he said. Sherlock danced away, snickering. John shook his head, going back to his laptop. “Cheeky bastard.”

And Sherlock was a cheeky bastard, among other less charming things, but John was starting to suspect that he might just be in love with that cheeky bastard.

Chapter End Notes
You may have noticed that the total chapter count for this fic has gone up to 12. I had intended to write a single chapter that began in London and carried on into Sussex, but I’d gotten 2500 words into this chapter and hadn’t even gotten Sherlock home from the after party, so the chapter had to be split. I didn’t think anyone would object to more happy sexystimes.

MetaNotes for Chapter 8

1. I’ve kept Sherlock’s address as 221B Baker Street, but obviously I have presented a very different flat than the one in canon. I thought given the AU nature of the fic that I could get away with it, and that Actor!Sherlock would have a different sort of flat than our consulting detective.
2. Thea is Thea Sharrock, a theater director probably most famous for staging the revival of “Equus” that starred Daniel Radcliffe. She also directed Benedict in “After the Dance.”
3. The quote about all relationships failing until one doesn’t is courtesy of American sex advice columnist Dan Savage.

Congratulations to mrsealers on Tumblr, who won our Fake Film Contest! Both of her suggestions took the prize. The film described in this chapter, Out of Noise, was one of her suggestions. John’s film will be mentioned in an upcoming chapter.
Chapter 9

Sally showed up at noon, carrying two large shopping bags. John pulled his suitcase out of the bedroom. “I’m not sure I have enough clothes for a week’s holiday,” he said.

“No worries,” Sally said, pointing to the bags. “I went out and bought you some more.”

Sherlock chuckled at John’s amazed expression. “But – how did you…”

“I rang Harry and got your sizes. You’re all sorted. The house is fully stocked, you won’t need naught but yourselves and your clothes. Although, the clothes might be a wee bit optional as well,” she said, smirking at Sherlock.

Sherlock shook his head. “There, John, you see? And to think you were worried that there wouldn’t be any suggestive snark flung in our direction. Thank God you’re here, Sally,” he said, heading off to the bathroom to get his own bag.

John watched him go, smiling, but when he turned back Sally was right in front of him. He jumped a bit. “Cor, Sally, have a care.”

“All right, then?” she said, giving him a rather speculative look.

“Yeah, all right. Thanks for the clothes.”

She took a deep breath and shut her eyes. She looked like she was bracing herself for what she was about to say. “Look – be good to him, all right? I know he’s a stroppy bastard but I sort of love him.”

John smiled. “I’ll be as good to him as he deserves at the moment, will that do?”

“I suppose that’s the best we can hope for.” She patted his arm. “Thanks. You’re both looking irritatingly happy.”

“I think we are.” And he was. Ridiculously, giddily, run-through-a-field-of-wildflowers happy.

“Sally, don’t ring me unless something’s burned to the ground, all right?” Sherlock grumped, lugging his suitcase out of the bedroom. “I shall be very much occupied. I’ll have my laptop, you can email me if something comes up.”

“I’m quite sure something will be coming up,” she said, grinning.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Are we quite finished with Clumsy Innuendo Comedy Hour? Come along, John. Let us spirit ourselves away from all these tiresome people.”

They all piled into the elevator, but they bypassed the lobby and went downstairs into an underground garage. Sherlock and Sally led the way and John tagged along, until he realized where they were headed and stopped short. “Sherlock, my God!”

He stopped and turned. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Is that your car?” John asked, incredulous. They were walking toward a black Jaguar XK convertible, gleaming and elegant and glossy. It looked like Sherlock in car form.
“Yes. Why, what kind of car have you got?”

“I drive a Honda. A nice Honda, I grant you, but…”

Sherlock glanced from the car back to John’s incredulous face. “Problem?”

“No, it’s just – something of a wet dream on wheels, that is.”

Sherlock shrugged. “If you say so. I’ve not much interest in cars.” He opened up the boot and heaved his suitcase inside, along with the bags from Sally. John lifted his own case in to sit beside Sherlock’s.

“Why this car, if you didn’t care?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Greg said once that he’d always liked this model. I wanted a car so I could go down to Sussex whenever I liked, so I bought this one.” He bunged the keys at John, who caught them on reflex.

“What, you want me to drive?”

“I dislike driving, and you seem rather keen.”

“I don’t know the way.”

“John, do try and keep up. I know the way and I’m sure you’ve realized that I’ll be in the car with you.”

“Oh, piss off, smart-arse!”

Sally shook her head. “You two sound married already.”

John trotted around the front of the car. He was salivating a bit at driving out of London in this car. “Can we have the top down?” he said, excited.

Sally hesitated. “Best not, until you’re out of the city,” she said.

John sagged a bit. “Oh. Right.” It’d be too easy for them to be spotted together with the top down. He got in, sighing at the way the leather seat cradled him. Sherlock got in the passenger side.

“You boys have a nice time, now,” Sally said, dropping a wink at them.

Sherlock leaned over him and looked up at her. “If you are using ‘a nice time’ as a polite euphemism for sex then I daresay we won’t require the reminder.” John choked a bit, coughing while he felt his ears going crimson. He started the car, avoiding Sally’s eyes.

“Um, cheers, then,” he managed, barely glancing at her as he pulled out of the parking garage and up into the street. “Which way we going?”

“Surely you’re aware that Sussex lies to the south.”

“Are you going to be insufferable the whole way there?”

Sherlock didn’t say anything for a moment. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid it’s a bit of a reflex.”

like suffering your insufferability.”

“That made no sense whatsoever.” Sherlock said, but the worry had gone from his face. “We’ll be taking the A21 south.”

“Right you are,” John said, turning towards Hyde Park. “So where is this country house of yours? Shall I expect a squire and stables?”


John stepped on the accelerator, shivering with pleasure at the way the car purred and leapt and obeyed his commands. “Oh, you may not get this car back from me,” he said.

“I’ve never understood the stereotypical male fascination with cars.”

“How can you not? Listen to that. Feel it when you drive it. It’s like sex.”

“Hmm. You only say that because you haven’t had sex with me yet.”

John glanced over at Sherlock, who had a smug little smile on his face. “Yes, I have.” Sherlock blinked. “But, we haven’t…”

“Have we had orgasms in each other’s presence?”

“Yes, but…”

“Then we’ve had sex.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“I know what you meant.” He drove in silence for a few clicks, pondering the subject. “Have you ever done – that?”

“No. Have you?”

“No.”

“Well, not to worry. I’ve done research.”

John couldn’t help but grin at that. “Research? I hope it wasn’t laboratory research.” Sherlock laughed. “No. I didn’t require the assistance of any consenting test subjects. But there are literally thousands of resources for one’s education.”

“So if all you’ve done is research, how come you’re so certain that you’ll be such an amazing shag?”

“Confidence is a key component to good sexual performance, John.”

“Fake it till you make it, eh?”

“Let’s hope that there’ll be no faking.”

“And exactly when did you undertake this educational project?”

“A few weeks ago.”
“So you’ve spent the past few weeks, while we weren’t even really in touch, researching exactly how to go about having sex with me?”

“Is that bad?”

“You were really preparing for any eventuality, weren’t you?”

“Is it not always best to be prepared? Anyway, I had…” He stopped and harrumphed a bit. “I had some hopes that this research might come in handy.”

“Well, I daresay it might.” John frowned. “But – what if we’d never seen each other again?”

“Do you really think that was ever a possibility, John?”

John held his eyes for a second. “No. It wasn’t.” Sherlock’s gaze warmed up a bit, his lips curling in a smile. John returned his eyes to the road and drove on, feeling pretty chuffed about his life at the moment.

A bit too chuffed, actually. Time for something to go horribly awry. He perked up his attention a bit, looking for that stray lorry or inattentive pedestrian or a patch of unseasonable black ice that could ruin everything in a heartbeat.

Sherlock sighed. “Stop looking for problems.”

“How d’you know I am?”

“You’re thinking that things are going too well, so you’re waiting for it to start unraveling. In some quarters that’s what’s known as a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Well, if things were going to go pear-shaped, now’d be the time, wouldn’t it? I’m in a gorgeous car with my gorgeous boyfriend, driving to a country house in Sussex where we’re going to spend a great deal of time in bed. This would be just the moment that the gods would start thinking I was looking a bit too happy and smite me or something.”

He looked over at Sherlock, who was staring at him oddly. “Is that what I am?”

“Is that what you’re what?”

“Your – boyfriend.”

John shifted in the seat. “I suppose we never talked about what to call each other, did we? Don’t like that one?”

“What are my alternatives?”

“Umm – I guess ‘partner’ is the polite term.”

Sherlock made a face. “Sounds so dry and corporate.”

“Lover?”

“That’s a bit intimate for casual conversation, isn’t it?”

“I’ve always thought so. Well, beyond those three it starts getting ridiculous. Given a choice, I’m going to go with ‘boyfriend.’”
Sherlock made a vague grumbling noise. “If we must.”

John pulled up to an intersection in Westminster. He glanced to his right, and what he saw there made his stomach drop. It was a paparazzo on a motorbike, his camera slung across his back. He opened his mouth to say something but Sherlock beat him to it.

“The windows are tinted, John. He can’t see us.”

John huffed out a relieved breath. “Oh. That’s – good, yeah. Good.” He could feel Sherlock looking at him but kept his eyes grimly forward. He at least wanted to enjoy the drive down before they started in on the dozen or so difficult conversations they were going to have to have.

John drove through London’s sprawl, trying not to think about photographers lurking. He and Sherlock chatted aimlessly about nothing in particular. Their favorite spots in the city, the schools they’d gone to as children, things they hated about Los Angeles. Soon enough they’d transitioned into the countryside. As promised, they pulled off at a petrol station so John could put the top down. Sherlock went into the shop and returned with two cups of tea. John got back in the car and started it up, and they both donned their sunglasses, turning to grin a bit madly at each other. “Now this is how one goes on holiday,” John said. He gunned it out of the petrol station and they roared down the A21 towards Hailsham.

Within a few miles Sherlock had him leave the main road and detour onto the less-traveled country lanes. John sighed and tilted his face up into the early-September sunshine. The scents of trees and cut grass filled the air, and all seemed right with the world. Sherlock had angled his body in the seat so he could stretch out his impossibly long legs and rest his feet out the window, ankles crossed. They didn’t talk much as John drove. The roar of the wind through the car made it difficult, and John couldn’t speak for Sherlock, but for himself, he was glad for the downtime. What was happening between them made him happy and excited, but it also required some adjustments in his internal sense of himself, and would no doubt continue to do so. He was no longer just John Watson, the bachelor, or John Watson, who had a fake girlfriend. He was John Watson, who had a real, actual, flesh-and-blood significant other. Who was a man. This was all fine. He’d had three months spent fantasizing about Sherlock to internalize the concept. Having the fantasy become reality – that would take awhile to get used to.

No time like the present.

Sherlock was turned away, watching the scenery go by. Keeping his right hand on the wheel, John stretched out his other arm and rested his hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck, giving it an experimental rub. Sherlock leaned into the touch, so he kept it up. After a few moments, Sherlock’s hand found a new home resting on John’s thigh. John smiled as the car flew down the road, hugging the curves.

This felt – comfortable. Which was not a word he’d ever thought he’d be able to apply to Sherlock, not if they were together for fifty years.

He ought to have known that Sherlock wouldn’t tolerate “comfortable” for too long.

After a few minutes, Sherlock turned his head and smiled, a little glint in his eye that made John suddenly feel a bit nervous. “What?” he said.

Sherlock brought his legs back into the car and hitched a bit closer in his seat, as far as he could. He unsnapped his seat belt and leaned in. “I owe you one.”

“One what?”
Suddenly there was a hand between his legs. John jumped. “Bleeding Christ, Sherlock! I’m driving here!”

“That drive,” he purred against John’s cheek, the stir of his breath sending a bolt right to John’s cock.

“Ohhh bollocks…” John just tried to maintain a reasonable level of attention to the road while Sherlock sucked at his earlobe and his neck and rubbed his cock through his jeans. He hooked one arm around John’s shoulders and pulled himself half over the gearshift to get closer.

“Better keep your eyes on the road,” he said, that voice of his a deep rumble in John’s ear.

“I’ll be killing you later, just so we’re clear,” John gasped, both hands clutching the wheel now as Sherlock unbuttoned his jeans and got his hand inside. His long fingers wrapped around John’s achingly hard cock and gave it a few firm strokes. “This has got to be illegal.”

“Only if we’re caught.” A low chuckle that ought to have been illegal itself came from Sherlock’s chest. Without warning, he plucked John’s left hand off the wheel, ducked down and slid his mouth over John’s erection.

“Hooooooo Jesus fucking Christ goddamn…” A steady stream of muttered, half-inaudible invective spilled from John’s mouth. His foot spasmed on the gas pedal for a moment and the car leapt forward. He kept control somehow, his free hand tangling in Sherlock’s hair as the lunatic sucked him like he was in the bloody blowjob Olympics. “Oh God, Sherlock – this is a really bad idea…” He didn’t like to think about what would happen if they were stopped, or God forbid crashed, and he’d have to try to explain to the police just how they’d been occupied at the time.

Sherlock’s head popped up. His lips were swollen and wet and his eyes were full of mischievous arousal, and the sight of him made John’s knees go watery. “Would you like me stop? All you have to do is ask.”

John groaned and refocused on the thankfully-deserted road. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Sherlock grinned in triumph and went back to work. John combed his fingers through those dark curls, his hand riding Sherlock’s head as it bobbed and weaved in his lap. His brain wanted nothing more than to narrow his whole perception down to naught but his cock; John found that having to maintain his attention on his driving was prolonging the agony as well as the pleasure. He slid down in his seat a little to give Sherlock more room.

“My lover of less than twenty-four hours is giving me head in a moving car. Dear God, what am I in for with him? I don’t know if my heart can take it.

He felt his balls tightening, the muscles of his abdomen clenching. “God, Sherlock – I’m – I’m just about…” With a half-stifled cry John came, hard and fast, sweat popping to his brow and his fingers clenching in Sherlock’s hair. He sagged when it was over, gasping for breath, silver darts flashing in and out of his vision. But the car was still on the road and there were no pedestrians or other animals smashed into the grill, so he figured he was ahead of the game.

Sherlock tucked him back into his pants, buttoned his flies and sat up, swiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He swallowed again, with a slight grimace. “I admit that the swallowing part wasn’t quite what I expected,” he said, taking a drink of his tea.

“You didn’t have to, you know.”

“I know, but I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable and sticky for the remainder of the drive.” John
looked over at him for a moment, incredulous, then burst out laughing. A frown crossed Sherlock’s face. “What’s so amusing?”

“You are. You were worried about me being uncomfortable after the blowjob you gave me while I was driving?”

Sherlock smiled slowly, then chuckled. “I suppose it is a bit ridiculous.”

“You are ridiculous. And that was dangerous, reckless, bloody stupid, and brilliant.”

Sherlock rebuckled his seat belt, looking pleased with himself. John took a few deep breaths to calm himself down, then reached out and laced their fingers together. Sherlock was back to watching the scenery; he didn’t look around when John took his hand, but he squeezed back with his own, and their hands stayed where they were, fingers twined, for the rest of the drive.

As they drew near Hailsham, Sherlock directed him off the road to a series of increasingly quaint back lanes until they reached a turnoff. He turned into the drive; it passed through a grove of trees and then widened as it approached the house. John stopped the car and stared up at it. “Sherlock! It’s gorgeous!”

Sherlock hopped out of the car without opening the door. John envied his easy grace, opting for the more traditional exeunt. “It is, isn’t it? Rather lovely, I think.”

It was a vine-covered brick cottage, two stories, set amidst a profusion of colorful flowers and trees. It looked like something out of a Merchant-Ivory film. “And you keep this up, just so you can come down once in awhile?”

“Oh, no. There’s a caretaker that maintains it. And I do share it with my brother. He uses it more than I do, I’m so seldom in the country these days.” Sherlock had their bags out of the boot. John took his own bag from him and they went to the door. Sherlock produced a key and opened it, motioning for John to precede him.

John started through the door but stopped on the threshold. He turned and grabbed Sherlock, pressed him up against the doorknob and kissed him hard, sweeping his lips open and pulling Sherlock’s hips tight against his own. Sherlock was startled for a moment but responded quickly, looping his arms about John’s shoulders and melting down into the kiss. John kept at him, taking some small part of his revenge for that blowjob in the car. He’d been at Sherlock’s mercy then, but soon, it’d be his turn.

He drew back, giving Sherlock’s arse a squeeze. “Teach you to give head to unsuspecting men in cars.”

“Why, John. I had no idea you were so alpha-male. Is this an attempt to – how does the phrase go? Make me your bitch?”


“Well, you’ll get your chance.” Sherlock leaned close, cupping John’s cheek in one hand and whispering right into his ear. “Because tonight, I want you to take me to bed, and then I want you to take me.”

A full-body shiver nearly enough to make him lose his footing passed over John at the words. He hung on to Sherlock’s narrow hips to steady himself. “You mean – you want…”

“You. Inside me.” He withdrew, kissed John once more, grabbed his suitcase and went ahead into
the house. John leaned back against the doorframe for a moment, composing himself, before he
followed suit.

He’d been half-expecting a posh, carefully-decorated interior, but the house was very homey, full of
rag rugs and rocking chairs and wooden furniture worn silky smooth by years of hands and feet and
human bodies. He and Sherlock stashed their bags in the bedroom they’d share – John had to try
hard not to stare at the bed that would surely be hosting much of their time here – and went back
downstairs in search of tea.

“Oh, your favorite kind isn’t here. We can go into the village tomorrow and fetch some,” Sherlock
said, looking through the cupboards as John put the kettle on the hob.

“You know what kind of tea I like?” Sherlock gave him an oh-please sort of look. “Of course you
do, I’m sorry, how very thick of me.”

“Yes, quite.”

John found the teacups and chose from what tea there was. Sherlock sat at the high butcher-block
kitchen island and watched him move around the kitchen. He set the cups down and went to the
fridge for milk.

Once the tea was ready and they were drinking it, a borderline-awkward silence fell. John sat on a
stool across the island from Sherlock and looked around. “Well.”

“Well, what?”

“Here we are.”

“Your powers of observation are stunning, John.”

“What now?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

“You’ve dated other people, I know you have. You never went on holiday with anyone?”

Sherlock was quiet for a moment, turning his teacup around and around on its saucer. “There have
been others who would have said that they were dating me. I’m not sure I ever dated any of them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It was something that was expected. It was also something that I felt I ought to experience, for
observational purposes. It helped me fit in with others, to seem normal.”

“You seem well normal to me.”

“You’re the only one who thinks so.”

“How did you choose these – people?”

“Some of them chose me. Others were suggested to me by interested parties. There were a few who I
met and found appealing, in as much as I ever found anyone so.”

John was starting to feel like a bright, intense spotlight was shining on him from above, its source
unseen, the hot lamp drawing sweat to his face. “Sherlock, why me? Why am I different? Assuming
that I am different.”
Sherlock’s head snapped up at that, his gaze piercing. “How can you not know that you are?”

“Then tell me why.”

“I can’t. I don’t know why. It’s very vexing.” His brow furrowed, his eyes dropping back down to his half-empty teacup.

He looked so perplexed, so frustrated by his inability to articulate or even perceive the reason that John was different. John took pity on him. “Do you know when I first started to fancy you?”

Sherlock looked up. “No, when?”

“I didn’t really twig to it at the time, but looking back – it was that day I did the big scene, and I found out you’d asked for my dailies. I went over to confront you about it only to find that you were angry with me. You were angry that I was wasting my talent. It offended you.”

He nodded. “Yes, it did. It still does.” Sherlock folded his arms on the countertop. “As I’ve told you, over the summer I’ve watched every film you’ve ever made.”

“I know,” John groaned, putting a hand over his eyes. “I’m trying not to think about it. I’m mortified by the thought of you watching some of those films.”

“While I watched them, I thought about two things. First, I thought about what it meant that as time went by I missed you more, not less. Second, I thought about all the films that you could have been making over the last ten years, good films, films worthy of your talent, films that I’d very much like to have been able to watch instead of ones I was watching. It made me angry.”

John bristled a little. “Angry. Huh. You know, as much as I’m not thrilled by some of the films I’ve made, I don’t actually need your stamp of approval.”

“You needn’t fear that seeing them has in any way tarnished my opinion of you, John.”

That response caught John a bit wrong-footed. Sherlock had just bypassed what he’d said entirely and gone straight for what he’d really meant. “How could it not?” John said, quietly.

“Because no matter how awful the writing or the directing or the acting of your co-stars, there was always one constant, and that is you. You were never less than your best. You always committed wholeheartedly, and I can’t imagine how hard that must have been given some of the material you had to work with.”

“You have no idea,” John said, grimly.

“It’s easy to commit and do your very best to turn in an honest performance when you’re working with well-written scripts and collaborators with strong vision. When it’s hard is when you know the material isn’t worthy of your efforts, but you do it anyway. I admire that. I may not respect those films, John. But I respect you in them.”

John met his gaze and held it. “It’s been a long time since there was anyone in my life whose respect actually mattered to me.”

“You’ll always have mine.” The moment spun out in silence, and John could feel things shifting between them. Sherlock drained his teacup. “It’s not as if I haven’t appeared in a few dodgy films myself.”

“We all have. You’ve a better track record than I do, though.” He sighed, the warm sunlight
streaming in the kitchen window painting Sherlock’s face in gold. “I saw your Oscar, back at your
flat.”

“Ah, yes. My favorite paperweight.”

“Oh, stop with the it-means-nothing routine, it’s bollocks.”

“There’s no routine. It did mean something and I was thrilled to win.”

“I think you should have won for Out of Noise.”

“Thank you. It’s not an uncommon opinion. I didn’t expect to win. First time nominee, nobody knew
who I was. The nomination was a sort of welcome-to-the-club acknowledgment that I’d have a
future in the business. The attitude is typically that someone in that circumstance will have other
chances.”

“How did you get that part, anyway? It was a large, demanding role and it’s not as if you were in the
mainstream.”

“No, indeed. Todd had something very specific in mind and he was having trouble finding it. A
teacher of mine from RADA got to talking with him at a film festival and she suggested me for the
part.”

“What did he need that was so specific?”

“He wanted an actor who could actually play the violin. It was such an integral part of the character,
he was reluctant to use a double.”

John’s jaw dropped. “That was really you playing? The whole film?”

Sherlock smiled. “Yes, it was. I thought that was common knowledge.”

“Not to me, it isn’t! You play the violin?”

“Since I was four. I studied it at school, in fact I almost went into music instead of drama.”

“I’d really love to hear you play sometime.”

“You can hear me right now, if you like. I keep a violin here.”

John was up off the stool so fast that it made Sherlock laugh. “Yes, please.”

They tidied their teacups and Sherlock trotted up the stairs, returning a few moments later with a
violin case. John settled himself on a large, deep window seat and watched as Sherlock tuned the
instrument, cocking his head toward the strings, finessing the pegs. He rosined the bow in a few
quick, sure strokes, then looked at John. “What would you like to hear?”

“Oh, I don’t care. Whatever you like.”

Sherlock stood in the middle of the room and lifted the violin to his shoulder. He made a few
experimental scrapes across the strings, then launched into music.

John watched him, entranced. The piece sounded familiar but John couldn’t name it; his knowledge
of orchestral music was limited to film scores. Whatever it was, it was beautiful. But it wasn’t the
music that riveted his attention, it was Sherlock.
People often spoke of him as being cold and emotionless. Detached. Frigid. Unsympathetic. That had certainly been John’s impression of him before he’d gotten to know him personally. But oh, if those people could only see him like this, they might reconsider. The music was imbued by Sherlock’s hands with sweeping landscapes of emotion, as if everything he did not express in life was funneled into his playing. His lithe body went fluid, moving with the instrument, the notes coming from the soles of his feet up through his arms and through the wood and metal of the violin.

John sat there in the window seat, watching Sherlock play, and had a moment of clarity.

I am in love with this man, and I am terrified.

It took him a moment to realize that Sherlock had finished playing and was now looking at John with an expectant expression. “John?” he said, sounding a bit unsure.

John got up off the window seat and went to him. He plucked the violin and bow out of his hands. “I can’t wait until tonight,” he said. “I want you now.”

Sherlock’s eyes went a bit cloudy. He reached up, took John’s face in his hands and kissed him. John kissed back, grabbing at Sherlock’s waist. They stood grappling in the living room for few moments until John pulled away, seized Sherlock’s wrist and drew him toward the stairs. They stumbled up, grasping and yanking at each other, until they staggered into the bedroom in a tangle of feet and arms.

Clothes flew as they undressed, kissing and groping every few seconds and getting tangled in their own clothing and each other’s. John’s eyes drank in his first real sight of Sherlock fully naked. John’s shirt hung open from his shoulders and he was down to just his pants, but he had to stop and stare for a moment. “God, Sherlock,” he whispered. He pushed him to the bed and sat him down. He stood between Sherlock’s knees and stroked both hands down his face, which was tipped up to John as though he were offering himself. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you,” John said.

“I never knew what it meant to want,” Sherlock said, stroking John’s chest. “Not until you.” John bent and kissed him. Sherlock pushed John’s shirt off his shoulders and pulled it off, then slipped his boxers down his hips so John could step out of them. John broke off for a moment to go to his bag and retrieve the lube and condoms he’d brought. Sherlock smiled. “Looks like I wasn’t the only one who came prepared.” He grasped John’s hands and pulled him down to the bed. They fell together on top of the quilt, kissing wherever they could reach, twining their limbs together.

John had done a bit of his own research, not the least of which had been an embarrassing conversation with his very gay massage therapist, who he’d been going to for ten years and trusted implicitly. But no amount of reading or awkward demos could have prepared him for the moment when Sherlock was lying before him on his stomach, John kneeling between his spread thighs, and it was time to put up or shut up. He was a little overwhelmed by the trust Sherlock was putting in him. I’ve got to make this good for him. If I can’t bring myself to say the words – yet – I’ll have to show him what he means to me. I’ve got to make it amazing. Sherlock looked back over his shoulder. John had to sit down on his heels, a little dizzy just at the sight of him like that, back arched, his pupils blown wide with arousal. “John, it’ll be fine,” he whispered.

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the small of Sherlock’s back. There were steps to be taken. He slipped on a condom first, giving himself a few lubed strokes. This had been his therapist’s piece of advice – not to wait until the last minute. Sherlock hissed in a fast breath as John began to prepare him. God, it was tight. Was this even possible? He knew it was, people did it every day, but it just didn’t seem like it. His cock wasn’t exactly small, and right now he was harder than he’d ever been in his life for wanting this man.
“Please, John,” Sherlock groaned, writhing a bit beneath John’s fingers.

“I think you need…”

“I’m ready. Come on.”

The desire in his voice drove a hard spike of want up John’s spine. He grasped Sherlock’s hips and pulled him up a bit, positioning himself. Another piece of advice had been to go slow, which seemed like a near-impossible task right now when his whole body was screaming at him to just plunge his cock into Sherlock and take him hard. There’d be a time when he could do that, perhaps, but not now. Now he had to go slow. He pressed forward and felt Sherlock’s body give way – but then Sherlock gasped and cried out in pain, pulling forward and away. John jerked back in alarm, going soft in an instant. “Oh, Sherlock – are you all right? I’m so sorry…” he said, misery dousing the heat of his desire. He lay down next to him.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, with a disappointed sigh. “It just felt like too much.”

“I should have gone slower, I’m sorry, it’s my…”

“No. It’s not your fault. I thought I was relaxed but the minute you started I tensed right up again.”

He turned to his side and burrowed close to John, tucking his head beneath John’s chin. “I’m sorry, I just wanted it to be good.”

John wrapped his arms around him, chuckling a little. “Maybe that wasn’t realistic. We’re both new to this. And you know, we don’t have to have sex like that at all if we don’t want to.”

“But I do want to. Don’t you?”

He sighed. “God, yes. The thought of being inside you, of you inside me – yeah, I want it.”

“Then we will. We’ll work it out.” Sherlock tilted his face up and kissed John, slow and gentle, teasing his lips open. John slid his hand down to cup Sherlock’s arse – God, that arse, he couldn’t get enough of it. They just kissed and touched each other for a few minutes, heat springing to their skin. John felt Sherlock grow hard again against his hip. Sherlock stroked John’s cock, condom still on it, although the heat of his hand and the lube was making him feel like it wasn’t there at all. *That was good advice there, Stephen,* he thought, smiling against Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock pushed him over onto his back and crawled over him. “Let’s try it like this,” he murmured, kissing John’s neck before sitting up, straddling John’s hips. “I’ll have more control.”

John could only nod, dazed at the sight of all this Sherlock above him, a long column of pale, smooth skin filled with his blood and breath and life. He slid his hands around Sherlock’s hips and around to his arse, up his chest, wherever he could reach. Sherlock kept him pinned in place with his eyes, those unearthly verdigris eyes that every cinematographer he’d ever worked with had worshiped in close-ups and side-lighting. He rocked his hips over John’s until he was hard again, then reached behind, raised up and slowly inched his way down, taking John into his body. “Oh Christ, Sherlock,” John choked out. His neck arched, his head slamming back into the pillows, his fingers clenching on Sherlock’s hips.

Sherlock kept repeating his name, borne soft on each exhale -- like an incantation, barely audible. He braced his hands on John’s chest and rocked, his eyes closing and his face twitching as he made experimental movements, getting used to John inside him. John reached up and slid his fingers up his cheek and into his hair. Sherlock opened his eyes and met his. John lifted his hands; Sherlock took the cue and laced his fingers through John’s, bracing his weight on John’s elbows. John planted his
feet and raised his knees behind Sherlock and they moved together, back and forth like the tide coming in and going out, gently at first and then quicker. John’s heart pounded; he saw sweat sheen on Sherlock’s chest and face, the flush rising to his breast. He let go of one of Sherlock’s hands and grasped his cock, stroking it in time with the rhythm they were settling into. “John,” Sherlock breathed. “I can feel you,” he said, his head lolling on his neck.

“I can feel your heart beating,” John said, unaware he was going to say it until he heard it come out of his mouth. He could, too. He could feel Sherlock’s pulse through their connection.

Sherlock met his eyes again and John’s breath caught in his chest at the raw emotion he saw there; he’d never seen Sherlock so exposed in his expression, and it cut at him to see Sherlock’s desire, his trust and his love. He reached up and pulled him down because he had to kissing him again. He wrapped him up in his arms and worked his hips upward into him. Sherlock framed John’s head in his hands and kissed him back, tiny moans escaping his throat. He was writhing against John’s stomach, his erection trapped between them, and then John felt him stiffen and come, the warm wetness blooming between them. John grabbed his arse in both hands and followed after a few more strokes, the world going gray as he spent himself inside Sherlock’s body.

They just lay there clutching each other for a moment, catching their breath. Sherlock’s face was pressed into John’s shoulder. He combed his fingers through the curls, as he thought he’d never get tired of doing. He cradled Sherlock to his chest, overcome with the sudden need to protect him and make everything all right for him, in perpetuity, as long as he was able to do so.

Sherlock pulled back and kissed him. “Second time’s the charm,” he rumbled.

“Jesus, you have to be careful how you deploy that voice,” John said, smiling. “Unless you want to find yourself on your back again.”

“Maybe I do.”

John chuckled. “Fucking hell, give me a minute. I’m not twenty-five anymore.”

Sherlock rolled to the side, John sliding out of him. He drummed his fingers on John’s damp chest. “Not to worry. Next time I fully intend to have you on your back.” He grinned and winked, then got up and went into the attached bathroom.

“Fucking hell,” John repeated, in wonderment. The idea filled him with anticipation and a little nervousness. He got up and joined Sherlock in the bathroom.

After sorting themselves out a bit, they returned to the bed and slid beneath the covers. John lay on his side, head propped on his elbow, and let his fingers dance meaningless little trails over Sherlock’s skin. Sherlock watched his face. They didn’t speak for a few minutes.

“What are we going to do?” John finally said.

Sherlock’s eyes closed for a moment. He turned his head and looked up at the ceiling. “Do about what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. It’s the one role you can’t perform convincingly.”

“You’re referring to how to handle the public aspects of our lives where it concerns our relationship.”

John dreaded the answer, but he had to ask the question. “Do you want a relationship with me?”
“I’d have thought that would be obvious.”

“Having sex on a holiday in Sussex isn’t a relationship, Sherlock. It’s a fantasy.”

“I’m not the world’s most knowledgeable person as to what constitutes a relationship.”

John sighed. “Why don’t you just tell me what you do want?”

Sherlock was still for a moment, then he turned on his side to face him. “All right. Here is what I want. I want you to be there when I wake up, and I want to be there when you go to sleep. I want to only have to cross a room to talk to you, not an ocean or a city or even a street. I want you to know the things I know, and I want to know the things you know. I want to assume that I will see you every day. I want us to have plans without having to make the plans. I want to you to be a part of my decisions about my career, and I want to be a part of yours. I want to read the scripts you’re considering and have you read mine. I want to know that you are there and for you to know that I am. I want it to just be understood that anything that involves me also involves you.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t know what all that means.”

John’s eyes roved all over his face. “It means you want a relationship, Sherlock.”

“Then I ought to ask you if that’s what you want, too.” Sherlock met his eyes, and John saw in them vulnerability that he’d never thought to see there.

He put his hand on Sherlock’s cheek. “Yes. God, yes.” Such an expression of relief came over Sherlock’s face then that John had to kiss it all over.

They relaxed back against the pillows, tucked a bit closer now. “Your question remains unanswered, however,” Sherlock said.

“We don’t have to talk about it now,” Johns aid, suddenly loathe to do so. “Let’s just enjoy our time together.”

“That implies that you believe that time to be finite.”

“Well, it is, for now. I have to be back in Los Angeles on the weekend, and I’d like to visit my parents again before I go. I’d love it if you came back with me, but I know you can’t.”

“Not for a little while. I have some commitments until the end of the month. I had intended to return to Los Angeles for our ADR sessions and remain there through the winter.”

“Good. When you come over, would you…” John harrumphed, feeling a little insecure about asking this question. “I mean, you could stay with me. At my house.”

“I’d like that.” John could feel him thinking. “You don’t intend to tell anyone about our relationship.”

John blinked. “How did you…”

“Your suggestion that we cohabit at your home as opposed to mine. My condo is in a busy part of town. Your house is in a secure gated neighborhood where we are much less likely to be observed.”

“We can’t, Sherlock. We can’t tell anyone. Not yet.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“You don’t see why not? You’ve got to be fucking joking!”
“Our personal lives are no one else’s business.”

“Now you’re being deliberately obtuse. Sherlock – you and I are both coming off a few pretty lean years but we’re both still A-list film stars. And we’ve both been presumed to be straight, having only had public relationships with women. If we just – I mean, we can’t just – it would be a media circus.”

Sherlock sighed. “Why must everything be so tiresome?”

“I don’t like it any more than you do.”

“And yet you seem perfectly willing to go along with it and let yourself be cowed into silence.”

“I’m not letting myself be cowed, I’m being realistic! It shouldn’t matter, but it does. It shouldn’t be an issue, but it is. You’ve been in this business almost as long as I have, you know how many actors and actresses stay in the closet for the sake of their careers.”

“That’s their choice.”

“And they make it for a reason. I hate that this is the way it has to be, but I’m being practical, here. It would kill our careers.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that!”

“What if I don’t care?” Sherlock said, suddenly fierce.

John shook his head. “That’s very sweet, but I know that you do. Your work is your whole life, Sherlock.”

“I don’t need Hollywood and their disgusting hypocrisy,” he spat. “I can find excellent work in London. On the stage, in small films, in television productions. Most of the work there is better than what Hollywood offers me, and they won’t care if I choose you as a partner.”

“That’s fine for you, then. What about me? I’m not like you, Hollywood is where I work, it’s where I’m known. I didn’t take drama class with half the Royal Shakespeare Company.”

“What are you suggesting, then? That we hide in your house? That we let our publicists wheel us out with women on our arms as a cover? That we never ride in the same car or let ourselves even be seen together?”

John shut his eyes for a moment. His guts were rolling at the idea of hiding in the way Sherlock was describing. He wanted nothing more than to grab a megaphone and announce to the world that he and Sherlock were together, to tell the world, to tell everyone and everything else be damned. But he couldn’t. They couldn’t. “Yes. For now.”

Sherlock sat up, snorting. “For now? How long is that?”

John sat up as well, wrapping one arm around Sherlock’s waist and resting his chin on his shoulder. “It’s this film, Sherlock. To a Stranger is important to me, and I know it is to you as well. We can’t do anything to overshadow it, and if it comes out that its two previously-straight co-stars fell in…”

He cut himself off. Sherlock glanced at him, waiting. He cleared his throat and continued. “That its previously-straight co-stars are together after having met during the film, well, that’s that. That will be the story, the only story, and no one will care about the film itself. It’ll eat everything. We won’t
have a moment’s peace. We will be hounded night and day and it will not stop to let the film be seen
on its own merits, and it deserves that. We worked too hard on it. I know you don’t want that.”

“The film is important to me, of course it is.” He turned and met John’s eyes. “You are more
important.”

John’s chest ached. “Oh, God, you are too. But I need this, Sherlock. This is my chance for a new
career, a better one. If this film is as good as we hope it is, it could reinvent me. You’re the one who
said my career hasn’t been worthy of me. Well, this could mean I’ll have a shot at one that is. If I’m
with you, my tenure as the king of the date movie will probably be over. I need something else to put
in its place.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that we wait. I don’t want us to hide forever. I can’t do that anymore than you can. But
the studio will murder us both in our sleep if we drop this bomb before the film opens. We can
manage for a few months. Until after the Oscars. Once that’s over and done with, we can go public,
and fuck them all if they don’t like it.”

Sherlock was searching his face like he was puzzling something out. “John, I’ve never known you to
be less than wholly brave. This isn’t you. I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it, either. I hate it.” He kissed Sherlock’s shoulder. “God, I want to be seen with you. I
want to walk a red carpet with you on my arm, I want to tell the whole world that you are mine and I
am yours.” He sighed, stroking his hand through Sherlock’s hair. “I suppose this is my payback for
being so sure of myself. I’ve said it so many times, that gay actors should just come out. Why should
they be afraid? Why should they hide? I’ve said it offhandedly, as if there were no good reason for
them to keep it secret, as if I knew better than they did. Turns out it’s a bit more complicated when
it’s you.”

Sherlock sighed, a long and shuddery one. “I don’t want to hide, John. But I will, if you say we
must. Your career is the important thing here. I want you to have the respect you deserve as an actor.
I want you to have the chance to play parts that are worthy of your talent.” He met John’s eyes. “But
– we will be together, won’t we? You’re not saying we should stay away from each other until after
the Oscars.”

“Christ, no. I couldn’t do that if my life depended on it.” He reached out and drew Sherlock into his
arms, hugging him tight. “I won’t give you up. Not for anything.” Sherlock hugged him back hard,
brurring close to him, and John Watson had never hated his job more than he did at that moment –
almost as much as he hated himself.

Visual Aids!

Sherlock’s car:
Sherlock’s country house:
Chapter 10

Sally was just opening up the office when her mobile rang. She glanced at the screen to see who was calling. *Fabulous Bitch.* She grinned and answered. “Harry, you tart.”

“All right?”

“Yeah. Just getting to the office.” She thumped the mail down on her desk and sat down. “What’s on, then?”

“Just checking in. John’s forbidden me from ringing him. How are our boys?”

“They drove down to Sussex yesterday afternoon. Heard not a word since. Did you get the fax about the ADR sessions?”

“Yes, I got it. I’m watching the Tubes like you asked. My Google alerts are the envy of all who behold them. Plus I have a secret agent.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, our niece Isabelle. You think we’re Net-savvy, she’s a bloody ninja warrior. She’s taken it upon herself to become a member of all John’s fan communities and report on them to me. I didn’t even have to ask her to join up on Sherlock’s as well. She’s a smart one.”

“Anything?”

“Nothing new. No photos, no sightings. One posting on a fan forum said they saw John in Brentwood yesterday.”

“Where he was really, really not.”

“Indeed. But it looks like they made it out of town without a sighting. I’m worried about them going into Hailsham, though. You think they will?”

“Might do. If they need tea or something. I wouldn’t worry about it, though. Sherlock’s been going to Hailsham for years and he’s never been papped there, or even sighted there as I recollect. It’s a small town, he’s familiar, nobody cares. It’s a bit of an unwritten rule in places like that. Famous people come to get away, so you have to let them be away.”

“If someone saw them there together it might be enough to overcome the charming country reticence.”

“I’m not about to tell them they have to sequester themselves in the house.”

She chuckled. “Like they’d mind. Most of the chatter on the fansites is about John’s appearance on ‘The Mentalist,’ and they’re still trading stage-door photos of Sherlock from ‘Closer.’ It’s ramping up quite a bit for To a Stranger, though. It was like a bloody bomb went off when those publicity stills were released.”

“All right, well – keep your eyes open.”

“Cheers, luv.”

“Yeah, all right.” She hung up.
She’d barely had time to boot up her computer when there was a knock at the door. She frowned. Nobody ever came to the door here. Sherlock’s office was more or less a place for her to work and keep the files, and for him to have a neutral address to receive post. He was hardly ever here himself and nobody came here unless she’d asked them.

She got up and opened the door, and her heart sank. It was Anderson, the line producer, her very own on-and-off boyfriend. “David!” she said, feigning surprise even though she knew damn well why he was here. “I wasn’t expecting you until next week! This is a nice surprise.”

He looked grim. “Where are they, Sally?”

“Wait, who are we talking about?”

He came inside and shut the door behind him. “Don’t make this more awful than it has to be. I don’t want to be here and nobody wants me to be here but this is the reality of the situation. Where are John and Sherlock?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t work for you, David. I work for Sherlock. Ordering me to betray his confidence isn’t the way to stay in my good graces.”

“I’m just trying to look out for them,” Anderson said. “We’ve got to make sure they aren’t seen.”

“And you’re doing all this out of a deep sense of concern for Sherlock’s privacy, of course. It can’t be to safeguard the profit margin of your film.”

“It’s their film, too.”

“He isn’t stupid, you know.”

“No, but he is stubborn.”

“You say that as if you think it’s news to me, somehow. And if I told you exactly where he was, what then?”

“I just need a word.”

“Then send him a fucking email, already!”

“This isn’t a conversation one likes to have via email.”

“I won’t disturb Sherlock. He’s on holiday.”

“Alone?”

“I can’t confirm or deny that.”

Anderson took a step closer. “Can we drop the act? We know where he is, and who he is with.”

“Then why the bad cop routine? Hoping I’d make it easier for you? Think again.”

“You think anyone is happy that we have to worry about this? If it were up to me I’d be sending them champagne and wishing them every happiness. But this is right from the top. Past Jim, even. This has to be contained.”

“A word more appropriately applied to nuclear meltdowns.”
“That’s exactly what we’ll have on our hands if the press gets wind of the fact that our lead actors are off somewhere in Sussex, shagging each other’s brains out.”

Sally tightened her jaw. “If you need to talk to Sherlock, you won’t be doing it through me. Not until he gets back from his holiday.”

Anderson nodded and went to the door. “I’ll find another way, then.”

Bright panic bloomed in Sally’s throat. She hurried over and slammed the door before Anderson could leave, then stood up against it so he couldn’t open it again. He looked at her in surprise. “Please,” she said. “Please, leave them alone.”

He swallowed hard and looked desperately miserable. “I can’t. Don’t you understand? I can’t.”

“They’re in love,” Sally said, playing her last card. “They’re so in love, David. Do you know what that means for them? Do you know how hard it’s going to be, what they’re going to go through? Give them some time before you start bringing reality down on their heads. Just a few days alone to get their feet under them. If they’re going to survive it they’re going to have to be strong with each other. Don’t cut their knees out before they’ve even had a chance to spend any time together. Please.”

He held her gaze for a moment, then sagged in defeat. “All right, Sally. I’ll stall the higher-ups. But Jim and I aren’t the enemy here.”

“I hope not. John and Sherlock are going to need friends, not enemies.”

Sherlock woke early Monday morning, his second morning waking up with John by his side. He wondered if it would ever become routine, if there would ever come a time when the mere fact that John was here in his bed would seem like nothing extraordinary, just another commonplace part of life. He hoped not. He rather liked the sensation of waking up and being immediately amazed.

He slipped quietly out of bed, not wishing to wake John. He wasn’t fond of lie-ins by nature but John was, and they’d both been sleep-deprived of late, for reasons both mundane and fantastic. Sherlock went into the bathroom to answer the call of nature; when he came back into the bedroom he had to stop for a moment and look at John, free to do so without self-consciousness now with his subject asleep, curled on his side with his hands tucked beneath his cheek.

Sherlock tiptoed to the side of the bed and crouched there, looking at John’s face, peaceful in sleep. He wondered what John was dreaming of. John did not think of himself as having great beauty. Sherlock didn’t know how to tell him how wrong he was. John was surely the most beautiful thing in the world. Sherlock certainly couldn’t think of anything he’d rather look at.

He let himself watch for a few moments, until he began to feel uneasy about it. Wasn’t it a bit stalkerish? Watching one’s beloved sleep? Looming over them whilst they slumbered on, unaware? He didn’t know the protocol for such things, but he felt like a creeper so he straightened up and went in search of his clothes. Pajama pants were located behind the chair in the corner, t-shirt wadded up in the covers. He pulled them on over his nude body and padded downstairs to put the kettle on.

He wandered to the window that gave onto the backyard, quite an tranquil view of the pond and woods on the property. The house sat on thirty acres which backed onto a preserve, where there were lovely hiking trails that led into Hailsham and beyond. The early morning sun was slanting in, casting picturesque shadows over the dew-sparkled grass, and for once Sherlock found himself enjoying the aesthetics of the moment instead of pondering the relative humidity or gauging the
windspeed from the motion of the tree branches.

He was – content. It was a state he’d found himself in but rarely. Perhaps never, at least not like this. Content where he was, content in his own skin, content with the company.

His violin was still sitting on a chair where John had left it. Sherlock shivered a bit to remember the look in John’s eyes after he’d finished playing for him, and then they’d gone upstairs and it had been unexpectedly awkward and painful and bad but then it had been good – no, better than good, it had been everything.

Then after a serious discussion which Sherlock was determined not to think about until absolutely necessary, they’d made love again with their hands and mouths and their whole bodies and had fallen asleep with the sun still shining, spent and tangled together. Which only led to them being wide-awake at midnight, camped out on the couch in the den with hastily-arranged snacks and cuddling under a blanket, watching Bringing Up Baby and laughing together, a bit tipsy on the bottle of Gewürztraminer that Sherlock found in the fridge. The end of the film had been ignored in favor of some rather feverish snogging and groping under the blanket, which had led to stumbling back up the stairs to the bedroom for another go.

They’d only been here one night and Sherlock had already had more sex with John than he’d had in the last two years. Sex had always been an obligation to be fulfilled, something that was expected of him. He’d never known what it felt like to crave someone, not until now; it fit poorly inside him, poking him from within with sharp corners and unexpected angles, forever surprising him, like the sight of his own reflection in a mirror he hadn’t known was there. His thoughts lingered on John’s neck, his hands, his body, his mouth, the feeling of that mouth on Sherlock’s own body, the mind-bending discovery of what it felt like to bury himself in John, to be wrapped around and inside someone at the same time. It could become a preoccupation if he did not discipline his mind.

Good Lord, was this what it was like for other people? All the time? No wonder no one else ever seemed to get anything done, or to be able to muster the focus of discipline to think properly. The idea of sacrificing his own mental equilibrium on the altar of John Watson was disturbing, but damned if right now it didn’t feel like it was well worth it.

Sherlock gave himself a shake. Five minutes was about his limit for emotional introspection.

He got out his laptop and sat at the breakfast bar with his tea. An hour later he’d read his emails (nothing of significance that couldn’t wait), checked BBC News (ditto) and spent far too long Googling real estate in Los Angeles. He was interrupted by his mobile going off. Text message.

**Missing: one Oscar winning actor. Thirty-four years old, six feet tall, dark brown hair. Dead sexy. If found please return ASAP to bed of John Watson. Generous reward is offered.**

Sherlock grinned, a bloom of happy warmth bursting open in his chest and racing out to his fingers and toes, and gravity seemed to loosen its hold on his whole body for a moment.

He stared at John’s teasing text message. Was this what it felt like? Was this the feeling that humans had been writing and singing and painting about since the beginning of time? He’d long since given up on ever experiencing it firsthand, but what was this, then?

*I think – I think I might love him.*

The thought was there and then gone, tucked away to be looked at later, when it was perhaps a little less intimidating. He had things to do just now. Or rather *someone* to do. He got up and raced up the stairs. The sight that greeted him when he got there was John sprawled on his back in bed, propped
up on his elbows with the duvet tangled all around him. He was all golden skin and mussed bed-hair and sleepy smiles and it damn near knocked the breath out of Sherlock’s chest. “I heard something about a reward,” he said, stripping off his t-shirt.

John beckoned him with a jerk of his chin. “Get back in here.”

Sherlock tossed his pajamas pants aside and crawled back under the covers, settling on top of John, his morning erection brushing against Sherlock’s own rapidly hardening cock. “Mmm,” he hummed. “I’m sorry, did you get lonely?”

“Terribly,” John said, pulling him down into a languid kiss, his hands running up and down Sherlock’s back. “Something you ought to know about me.”

“That you are irresistible?”

John giggled, Sherlock adding another mental tally mark to his Making John Giggle scorecard. “Maybe to you.”

“Most certainly to me. You know that when I came in here and saw you, I forgot how to breathe for a moment? It was a little alarming. Good job that I didn’t require medical attention.”

John went quiet, his eyes searching Sherlock’s. “You’re not just saying that, are you? I mean, you’re not giving me a line just to get something. You mean it when you say things like that.”

“Of course I mean it. Why would I say it if I didn’t?”

He smiled and arched his neck to kiss Sherlock again, pulling on his lower lip, a part of him that seemed to fascinate John. “The fact that you can ask that question is – well, it’s just another reason I’m here with you.”

Sherlock looked down into John’s face, running one finger along his hairline. “You were going to tell me something I ought to know about you.”

“Oh, right. Something you should know about me is that I love, and I do mean love, morning sex.”

“I see. So for you to wake and find yourself alone in bed…”

“Deeply disappointing.” He ran one hand down Sherlock’s back to his arse, kneading it possessively.

“I’d hate for you to start the day disappointed.”

“That would be a shame.”

“Tell me how I might go about making amends.”

John thought for a moment, looking a little unsure. “I loved what we did last time. I wish you could fuck me again.”

“Why can’t I?” Honestly, that’s what he’d come up here with a mind to do. John had taken to it much better than he himself had, but that could have been the result of their learning from their mistakes. They’d gone much slower when it had been John’s turn.

“I don’t think I can again so soon. It’s a bit – sore.”

“Oh, John – I’m sorry, did I…”
“No, it’s nothing you did. It felt amazing at the time. I’m just not used to it.”

Sherlock kissed him hard, fast, quickly moving down to his neck, which he’d already learned was very sensitive. John arched into his mouth, a hand tangling in Sherlock’s hair. “I’m sure I can think of a suitable alternative,” he murmured. He slid down under the covers and took John’s cock in his mouth. He felt him groan and shudder, but after only a few moments he was pulling Sherlock away.

“No, I don’t want to come like that,” he said, breathy.

“How, then?”

John seized Sherlock’s arms and rolled them over, getting his knees between Sherlock’s legs and slotting their hips together. He hooked a hand behind Sherlock’s knee and lifted; Sherlock got the idea and wrapped his legs around John’s waist. John lay over him and kissed him with slow thoroughness. “I want to feel every inch of you,” he whispered in Sherlock’s ear.

Sherlock wasn’t quite sure what that meant. If John meant to fuck him again, he might have to raise the same objection that John had done a moment ago. But that would require leaving off kissing to speak, and he didn’t want to do that, either. For now John was just lying atop him, gently rolling his hips and working Sherlock’s mouth with his own. John felt pliable and drowsy, smelled of warm skin, and the whole experience was like sliding into a gentle whirlpool.

John began to thrust his hips harder against Sherlock, shifting around until their cocks aligned. Sherlock gasped at the contact and tilted his pelvis up. John dropped his mouth to Sherlock’s neck and their bodies rolled in waves on the bed, crashing against each other until John came, crying out Sherlock’s name. He stilled for a moment, then slid his hand between them and grasped Sherlock’s cock, stroking him until he spilled over John’s fingers, biting his lip and grunting. Then it was all breath and kisses and the slide of fresh sweat.

Sherlock kissed along John’s jawline to his ear. “Morning sex?”

John chuckled. “It’s a nice way to start the day.”

Sherlock had to agree with John’s assessment as to the best way to start the day. After their early romp, they rose just long enough to shower, fetch some breakfast, put on clean pajamas and get back into bed. John read a book, Sherlock sat up with his laptop. For hours, until well after noon, they lounged there together, each wrapped in their own pursuits. Even so, there was a togetherness in their silence. Their feet tangled together under the covers, they leaned against each other in turns. They exchanged quick, quiet kisses whenever the notion struck.

Around one o’clock, John put his book aside and rubbed at his eyes. “I suppose we ought to see about some lunch,” he said.

“Mmm.”

“And it might be nice to get out of the house.”

“I’m quite happy right where I am.”

“We can’t stay in bed for the whole day, Sherlock,” John said, smiling at him.

“Why not?”

“Well – because – we just can’t.”
Sherlock put his laptop aside and stretched out next to John, pulling him into his arms. John nestled against his chest. “How long can you stay?” he asked.

John sighed. “I have to fly home on Friday. I’d like to see my parents first, so we should spend Thursday night in town.”

“We’ll drive back on Thursday, then.”

“That’s only two more days we’ll have here. What happened to a whole week?”

“A week isn’t what it used to be, John.”

John slid his arm over Sherlock’s stomach and cuddled a bit closer. “Then it’ll be how long until you come to L.A.?”

“Three weeks.”

They were silent for a moment. “Blimey,” John said.

Sherlock knew what he meant. It had only been a few days for him and John but already the idea of being separated from him for even a single day, let alone three weeks, was depressing. “It’ll pass quickly,” he said, not really believing it.

“You know, I don’t think it will.” John turned his head and kissed Sherlock’s collarbone. “I’ll miss you awfully.”

“And I you.”

They lay there holding each other for a few minutes more, lost in their respective thoughts. “Well, come on, then. Let’s roust ourselves. How about we go into Hailsham, then? Get some lunch, have a look round? I’ve never been there.”

“If you like.”

John frowned. “Might we be spotted?”

“Unlikely. I’ve never been photographed there. At least, not that made its way to the public at large. We shouldn’t take the car, though. Too flashy. It’s only three miles, there are bicycles in the shed. We can ride.”

“Oh, brilliant. I’ve not ridden a bike in ages.” John grinned, excited. “It’ll be like an outing.”

“It won’t be like an outing, it will actually be one.”

“I know. I suppose I meant – it’ll be like something normal people do.”

“Are we not normal people?”

“Good Lord, no. We’re strange people. We work on weekends and holidays and people are paid to make us look as dashing as possible. We get paid to pretend for the amusement of others and people actually seem to care who designed our tuxedoes. Our jobs involve going to parties and films and talking about ourselves to people we don’t know. We live a bent, twisted existence, Sherlock. So let’s take a bike ride to a country town and get some tea and cakes and do something ordinary.”

They got dressed and made sure they had wallets and keys and such, then went out to the shed to retrieve the bicycles. They were shining silver touring bikes that looked eager to be taken out for a
spin. They wheeled them out, toed up the kickstands and each tossed a leg over and settled on the seat.

Whereupon Sherlock discovered the flaw in the current plan. His arse had been subject to some new activity lately, and it was raising a white flag at the idea of a six mile bike ride. He looked at John, who’d clearly just had the same revelation. “Or we could just walk,” Sherlock said.

“Yeah, let’s walk, then,” John agreed, nodding. The bicycles were retired back to the shed – Sherlock fancied that they seemed a bit disappointed not to be going out after all -- and he and John set off for the path at the back of the property.

It was, Sherlock mused as they ambled along, quite ridiculously idyllic. It was a beautiful sunny day, not too warm but comfortably breezy, and the late-summer foliage was lush and green. Sunlight was flattering to John, it made his hair gleam like gold, warmed his features and made his eyes glow deep blue like an aquarium. The path they walked was shaded and secluded, enough so that after few minutes along the way, John reached out and laced their fingers together.

“Your parents are dead, right?”

Sherlock hesitated. “Wikipedia?”

“IMDB.”

“Well, that’s the cover story.”

“They’re not dead?”

“My father is dead. My mother is very much alive. But she values her privacy. Her horror that both her sons entered professions which would thrust us into the public eye is matched only by her terror of public knowledge of her existence. So we tell people our parents are dead.”

“That seems harsh.”

He shrugged. “My mother and I aren’t close. She was too attached to the perceptions of others to care much about our actual lives. My brother is more dutiful than I am.”

“What’s his name?”

“Mycroft.”

“Can I meet him?”

Sherlock glanced at him. “Would you like to?”

John stopped and turned to face him, forcing Sherlock to stop as well. “Sherlock, are we going to be part of each other’s lives? On at least a semi-permanent basis?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Then yes, I want to meet your family.” He hesitated. “Unless you don’t mean to tell them about us.”

“No, I have every intention of doing so. Mycroft won’t care that you’re a man, he’ll just care if you have ties to the Mafia or any international terrorist organizations. Mother will wail about what the neighbors will think, then once she meets you she’ll ask you when we plan to give her grandchildren.”
John laughed. “Well, I’m quite sure I’m sorted on the Mafia and terrorist fronts, and I’ll have to get back to you on the grandchildren.”

They resumed walking. “What about your family?” Sherlock asked. “Do you plan to tell them?”

John was silent for a moment. “Remember how I said I wanted to see them before I fly back?”

“You’re going to tell them now?”

“Best to get it over with.”

“You don’t sound optimistic.”

“I honestly don’t know how I’m going to phrase it. Am I coming out? As what? I don’t know if I can just tell them something easy to grasp, like ‘I’m gay.’ I don’t know for sure that I am. All I know to tell them is that I’ve met someone who I want to be with, who is important to me, and who is a man.”

“I suspect that they’ll leap to the ‘gay’ conclusion all on their own.”

“That’s their business.”

“You think they won’t approve?”

“I honestly have no idea.”

“Your sister is a lesbian, is she not?”

“Harry? She plays for both teams. She’s never brought any women home, just men. I don’t know if that’s happenstance or by design, I’ve never asked her.” John glanced at him. “You don’t seem to be having any sexual identity issues.”

“I find the concept of binary sexual identity limiting and improbable. As with all else about human beings, sexual responsiveness exists on a continually changing scale that is affected by a dizzying array of variables, so there’s no point in attempting to predetermine a pointless and ultimately confining label.”

“Well, that’s certainly progressive of you.”

“It’s more useful to simply react when I am attracted to someone, regardless of their gender, and proceed from there. So if I have a sexual identity, it’s that on occasion I find another human being attractive.”

“How would you answer if someone asked you if you were gay or straight, though?”

Sherlock smirked. “I’d say ‘I’m Sherlock Holmes, I do what I want, and fuck you.’”

John burst out laughing. “Bloody hell, I want that on a t-shirt.”

“That can be arranged,” Sherlock said, chuckling with him. John pulled him closer by their joined hands and beamed up at him, laughter in his eyes, and Sherlock felt it again. That rocket-burst of warm happiness in his chest, the raw joy at being in John’s presence and basking in his attention, his regard and his acceptance.

Earlier I thought I might love him.
Thursday came far too quickly.

Their afternoon in Hailsham went off without a hitch. They reached the village, took a quick walk round, had tea and cakes, bought some of John’s favorite tea and walked back as the sun set, arriving home content, albeit with sore feet. They had a campfire in the garden that night and drank wine, swapping co-star horror stories, and took each other to bed with the evocative smell of woodsmoke lingering in their hair.

On Tuesday they packed up some food and gear, got in the car and drove toward the coast, where Sherlock knew some out-of-the-way hiking trails. They passed the day walking up hills and through valleys with views of the sea, pausing whenever they liked, going in whatever direction they fancied, and generally enjoying their freedom in the way that only men whose lives were usually excessively scheduled can. They ate their lunches on top of a meadowy peak, and spent a good half an hour working it off on a soft cushion of grass.

Wednesday found them in quieter spirits. Sherlock was keenly aware that it was their last full day in the country and so John seemed to be as well. They revisited the bicycles, both of their arses having adjusted to the new demands placed upon them, and rode aimlessly around Hailsham and its outlying regions, stopping frequently to take pictures. They ate supper at just the sort of local country pub John had been envisioning. He spent the entire meal looking around with an inordinately pleased expression on his face; Sherlock spent it just looking at John. They rode back well past dark, the headlamps on their bicycles lighting their path. Sherlock led John to the field behind the house, dragging an old quilt behind them. “I used to stargaze out here when I was a boy,” he said, spreading the blanket on the ground.

“Oh, I thought you bought this house yourself,” John said, as they stretched out on their backs.

“No, it belonged to my parents. When my father died it passed to Mycroft and myself.”

They looked up into the brilliant blanket of stars overhead. “It’s amazing,” John said. “You can’t see stars like this in London. Or in Los Angeles.”

Sherlock felt him twine their fingers together. He raised their linked hands to his own chest and held them there. “John, I – I’m really very much dreading you going away.”

“I know. So am I.”

“I’m not accustomed to taking someone else’s needs and wants into consideration. I don’t know how successful a partner I can be to you.”

It was pitch dark out so he couldn’t see him very well, but he could sense John propping up and looking down at him. “Where the hell is that coming from?”

“I just want you to know that if…” He swallowed hard. “If you want to consider this time we’ve had together to have been enough, and that it would be impractical to continue, then…”

“No, stop. Stop right there. Sherlock – God, you’re unbelievable. After all the conversations we’ve had? The decisions we’ve made together? The plans we’ve made? Suddenly you think I need an escape hatch?”

“I’m trying to be realistic. Soon we’ll reach the point of no return, or at least much less facile return. If I come to Los Angeles and move in with you…”
“Not if. You are coming to Los Angeles and you are…” John broke off, frowning a bit.

Sherlock nodded. “There, you see what it is that we’re really contemplating. It’s grand to be blue skies and chirping birds while we’re here but there, it’s going to be reality, John. With people who’ll demand explanations about why I’m living in your house, friends who’ll have to be kept in the dark, and photographers round every corner. We’re proposing moving in together. We’ve only known each other since the spring and we’ll have been together for less than a week. Seems a bit fast, doesn’t it?”

John flopped back onto his back. “Yeah. It does.”

“I am coming to Los Angeles either way. I do have my own place, there’s no need for me to stay with you. We can see each other every day.”

“That’ll be worse. Driving back and forth and meeting up and such, we’re sure to get papped.”

Sherlock’s gut clenched at what he was about to suggest. “John – don’t get the wrong idea, but perhaps it’d be best if we didn’t see each other until after the Oscars.”

John was very quiet. “Is that what you want?”

“No. It is not what I want. You know what I want.”

“You want to go public.”

“I know why we can’t, and I accept it. So if we can’t be together in the open and acknowledge it, maybe it’d be better, less hurtful for us, to take a break until we can.”

He heard John fetch a deep sigh. “Maybe it would.” No one spoke for a few beats. “Wait a minute, no, it would not!” John exclaimed, out of the blue. “It would not be better! Easier, perhaps. Less inconvenient, perhaps. But no, Sherlock! I am not giving you up because it’s easier.” He sat up again and pulled Sherlock up to face him. “I don’t care if it’s fast, it doesn’t matter that it’s new. I couldn’t be any more sure of you if we’d been together for a decade. And I’m not bloody staying away from you for six months. Three weeks is going to jolly well kill me.” He seized Sherlock’s face in his hands. “You remember what you said our first night here, about what you wanted? That what I want, too. You in my life, every day, all the time. I’m not going to wait. I don’t need it to be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is. So you listen to me, Mr. Holmes. You are going to come to Los Angeles the moment you’re able and you are going to move into my house and we’ll do whatever we have to do to keep it quiet, but that does not include breaking up, even if it’s temporary.”

Sherlock felt tears pricking his eyes. He lifted his hands and covered John’s. “That’s what I hoped you’d say.”

John pulled him into a tight hug. Sherlock wrapped his arms around him and held him, wishing he’d never have to let go ever again, and wishing even more that he do it in front of the whole world.

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They loaded up the car on Thursday morning, both of them quiet, going about their task with efficiency but not much enthusiasm.

Even though they’d have one more night together in London at Sherlock’s flat, they’d gone at each other the night before as if it were their last night on earth. John had unwrapped Sherlock on the blanket beneath the stars and claimed him again, wringing cries and raptures from his body that Sherlock hadn’t known were possible. They had staggered back to the house, leaning on each other, and collapsed into bed. John had been wrung out; he’d lain there and let Sherlock do as he wished,
which was to worship every inch of him and try to show him what he could not say, that John had changed him and that he couldn’t change back, that he wouldn’t want to if he could, and that if people were going to condemn him for this then he’d be glad to be condemned.

John looked around at the house and grounds. “I love it here,” he said.

“I’ve always been fond of it,” Sherlock said. “I think it may have acquired some new emotional significance, though.”

“How can we come back?”

“Of course. Whenever you like.”

“We’ll likely not have time for awhile.”

“It will still be here when we do.”

John took Sherlock’s hands in his and kissed him. “I feel like I’m driving to my doom.”

“Come now, the M25 isn’t that horrible.”

He laughed, a little thinly. “All right, let’s get it over with. All locked up, then?”

“All locked up.”

They got in the car, the top up this time as it looked like it might rain, and John drove them back to the highway. They stuck to the A21 and made good time into London. Sherlock felt the press and loom of its massed humanity, architecture, and cumulative gaze upon him as they drew near to his home. He hadn’t realized how free and unfettered he had felt in the country until they returned to the city and it was no longer so.

John pulled into the underground garage and they got into the lift, bags in tow. They both breathed a sigh of relief upon emerging into 221B. “Blimey,” John said, stretching his back. “I’ve spent one night here and it feels like home.”

“I’ve barely spent much more time than that here myself.” He looked around. “I’ve long considered staying here on a more permanent basis, only going to Los Angeles when required.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s something we’ll need to discuss, isn’t it?”

Sherlock smiled, his own words echoing in his head. *I want it to just be understood that anything that involves me also involves you.* “Indeed.”

John looked at his watch. “Cor, I hate to do this but it’s gone three already and if I’m to see my parents, I ought to be off.”

“Take the car if you like.”

John perked up a bit at that. “Yeah?”

“Of course. I’m not going anywhere.”

He stepped close and slid his hands around Sherlock’s waist. “And what will you do here all by yourself while I’m gone?”

“Attempt to catch up on my emails, I suppose. Have Sally come around, take care of some business.”
“That answer is incorrect,” John said, giving him a faux-severe look.

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Naturally, what I meant to say is that I shall swoon upon this couch like a Regency heroine and lie there in abject desolation until my swain doth return.”

John laughed. “That’s better.” He arched his neck up and kissed him. When he began to withdraw Sherlock pulled him close again, angling his head down and teasing John’s lips open. He felt John smile against his mouth and slide his hands up Sherlock’s chest to his neck. “Mmm, you’re not making it easy for me to leave,” John murmured, sneaking the words in between kisses.

“You have discovered my cunning plan, Mr. Watson.”

John gave his arse a squeeze and stepped back. “I am a grown man in control of my libido, I am capable of resisting sexy boyfriend.”

“Curses, foiled again.” Sherlock crossed his arms over his chest and he and John just stood there grinning at each other for a moment.

“All right, I’m off. I’ll try not to be too late. Likely have dinner with the family, though.”

“All right.”

John went to the lift, glanced back once with a wave, and was gone.

Sherlock sighed, then took up his suitcase and headed for the bedroom to unpack.

Sally came over shortly after John left. “How was your trip?” she asked. Sherlock searched her face for smirkiness, but she seemed genuinely interested.

“Too short,” he said.

“Everything went all right?” He knew what she was asking. Did you get along? Was the sex okay? Did you cohabitate successfully in the short-term? Was it more than just a showmance? Did it last after the adrenaline of him showing up wore off?

He met her eyes. “It was perfect.”

Sally smiled and patted his shoulder. “Good.”

“In fact, we’ve decided that when I go back to LA at the end of the month, I’m going to stay at John’s house.”

“All right.” He saw the unasked question on her face.

“We’re not going public. Not until after the Oscars.”

Sally thought for a moment. “It’s going to be tough.”

“I know. We know.”

“You know that Harry and I will do everything we can to help.”

“I know.”

“In fact, we’ve already been taking some steps.”
“I trust you, Sally.”

She looked absurdly touched at this. “Thanks, Sherlock. Gosh, I think I like this kinder, gentler you. John must be a good influence.”

He couldn’t help but flush a little bit. “I think he might be, yes.”

They sat at the dining-room table and over the next few hours went over emails, schedules, travel plans, prospective projects and Sherlock’s dozens of phone messages. They were just wrapping up around five o’clock when Sherlock heard the lift rising. That couldn’t be John come back yet; he assumed it was one of his neighbors. But the lift stopped and the doors opened.

Sherlock turned to see John come in. One look and he could tell that something had gone very wrong. He looked at Sally, who’d made the same assessment. “I’ll be on my way,” she said, gathering her papers up. John barely gave her a glance as she went past him into the lift.

“John, what’s wrong? You’re back earlier than you thought.”

John didn’t answer. He took off his jacket in harsh, fast movements and threw it onto the sofa, hard. He pressed the heels of his palms to his forehead.

Sherlock hung back, not sure what to do. “Did you – see your parents?” It was obvious to him what had happened, in the general if not the specific, but he knew he ought to let John tell him in his own way.

“Yes, I bloody saw my fucking parents.” John turned to face him. “They were their usual delightful selves. Dissatisfied with everything in their lives, none of which they pay for, I might add. I tolerated the usual hour-long litany of their physical complaints and made the appropriate noises of concern for their health. And when they finally got around to asking how I was, I told them that there was someone new in my life and that I was very happy. When they learned who it was, I was informed in no uncertain terms that no son of theirs was going to take it up the arse!” He shouted the last few words, grabbing the nearest object, which happened to be a book, and throwing it. It crashed into a lamp, which toppled to the floor. “Shit,” John said. “I’m sorry.”

“John, I…” Sherlock didn’t know how to handle this. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say. I hoped this wouldn’t happen but I feared it would. I told them that if I was no son of theirs anymore then I assumed they’d soon be moving out of the house that I bought and firing the home help that I pay for and getting jobs. Then it got ugly.”

“Then it got ugly?”

“My father wanted to know how long I’d been a bender, my mother just cried over not having grandchildren, which makes no sense since she already has four, then it was oh, we knew this acting bollocks would turn you queer, nothing but queers in films these days, and then my father…” John had been speaking rapidly, but suddenly he broke off, his throat working, and when he spoke again his voice was choked with tears. “My own father told me that he’d not be leaving me alone with my nephews again.”

Sherlock felt like he might be sick. “Oh, my God.”

“My nephews, Sherlock. Like I’m now some kind of danger to them, like I’m a deviant or a predator…I love those boys, God, how could he ever think…” He shook his head.

Sherlock did the only thing he could think to do. He went over and pulled John to his chest,
wrapping him up in his arms. John came against him at once and clutched at him. “I’m so sorry,” Sherlock said, pressing his lips into John’s hair. John tried to keep his composure for a few moments but then it just went. Sherlock held him as he cried, pushing away thoughts of all the ways he could exact slow, painful revenge on John’s parents for putting him through this.

John calmed himself quickly but stayed there for a time, his face buried in Sherlock’s shoulder. “God,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to go to pieces like that.”

“You had good reason. And if you cannot do so in front of me, then where can you?”

John nodded. Sherlock handed him a handkerchief and he blew his nose and wiped his eyes. “At least my siblings aren’t on board with this. They made sure I knew they were fine with it. That helps. And I’m thirty-eight years old, I’m not a kid anymore, but my own parents – it’s hitting me harder than I’d have thought.”

“John, I never wanted to come between you and your family. If I’d known…”

“No, stop right there,” John said, pulling back and looking up at him, his eyes blazing. “Let’s get one thing perfectly clear. You are not coming between me and them, Sherlock. They are. This is not your fault or mine, it’s theirs. And they’ll come around. They’re just having a tantrum right now, it’s a shock. I could have handled it better, I got angry and that just makes my dad want to push back. Some time will go by and my siblings will work on them, they’ll get used to the idea and…” He sniffed and laughed a little. “Well, they can’t really afford to cut me out of their lives, can they? I’m the bloody meal ticket.”

“That isn’t right either, I dare say.”

“Why not? Who else ought to take care of them but me? I have the means.” He smiled up at him, a tired and teary smile. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being here. For giving me a cuddle during my wobbly.”

“Is that not what boyfriends do?”

“I reckon it is.” John sat down with a flump, his whole body sagging. Sherlock sat facing him on a padded ottoman. “I’m bloody spent.”

“We’ll get some dinner, you must be famished.”

“Bit peckish, yeah. Give me a bit of time to sort myself out. I look a mess.”

Sherlock took his hands, shaking his head. “This is all so complex. Your family, our jobs, the business, the press – doesn’t seem fair. Other couples don’t have to deal with all this bollocks while they’re just getting used to being together in the first place.”

“I’m afraid that’s just our lot and we’re bloody well stuck with it.” John met his eyes. “And don’t you go getting more ideas about how it’d be easier if we just weren’t together.”

“Who says I was?”

“I do, and I ought to know.” He scooted closer. “Because you are worth it, all the bother, all the trouble, all the – everything.” His eyes moved over Sherlock’s face, and Sherlock could see him taking a breath, working himself up. Oh God. He’s going to say it. “Sherlock, I…”
“No, don’t,” Sherlock blurted out, holding up a hand. “Don’t say it.” Don’t say it before I get a chance. I loved you all this time, John, and it’s you who did this. You got on a plane, you came to my show and you forged us out of a single hydrangea, you held me in your arms and you didn’t let go even when I thought you should. This is all because of you and all you’re getting for it is bother and pain and please, let me give you something back before you blaze a trail ahead of me in that, too.

John shut his mouth with a snap and drew back, a crestfallen look on his face. “Oh. I, uh – all right, then. I won’t. Sorry.” He started to rise, avoiding Sherlock’s eyes, and the instant-replay in Sherlock’s head showed him the last few seconds again and he realized how that had sounded, and what John was probably thinking. Oh, well done, Holmes. Managed to bodge this up good and proper, haven’t you? Fix it, you cracking great idiot.

“John, wait – that isn’t what I meant, please, sit down. I’m sorry, I’ve made a right mess.” John sat back down, frowning. “I’m good at mimicking emotions, but apparently I’m hopeless with my own.”

John smiled, a little hesitantly. “I know.”

“You deserve someone who can properly express himself, who can speak to you the way normal people speak.”

“Oh, don’t let’s get onto this again about how I deserve better, no one’s better than you, and there’s nothing not normal about…”

“I love you, John.” John stopped speaking abruptly, his mouth hanging open. Sherlock held his gaze. The words were out, now. He found that all he wanted to do was keep repeating them until they filled the whole room, until their sheer magnitude approached the depth of the feeling he had for this man. “I’m sorry I stopped you, I know that’s what you were going to say and I couldn’t let you, I couldn’t have you be the brave one again, because you are always the one showing me the way through this and just once, I wanted to be the one taking the step and being brave for you.”

John had recovered himself a little. He grabbed Sherlock’s face, smiling even while his eyes were filling up again. “You don’t have to be brave for me, you lunatic. All I need you to be is you.”

“That’s not a concept I’m accustomed to.”

“I know, and I hate that, and I wish it were different.”

Sherlock was hanging on to John’s knees to steady himself. “You’re the only one who never wanted to fix me.”

“Why would I want to fix you? You aren’t broken.” John kissed him hard, once, then twice more. “You are barking mad and insanely talented and strange and wonderful and infuriating and amazing and I love you so fucking much, Sherlock.” Sherlock exhaled hard and let John pull him in, they tried to kiss each other but kept missing, getting each other’s cheeks and jaws and noses but it didn’t seem to matter. Finally they gave up and just held each other. Sherlock felt something settle along his spine, the nerves quieting, his whole being at rest.

“I love you,” he repeated in John’s ear.

“I love you, too.”

He drew back with a sigh. “Well, that’s sorted, then.”

John laughed. “Yes, let’s check that item off the agenda.”
“Come on, let’s get some food. I’m starving.”

They considered going out, but neither of them felt like they’d be able to carry off the whole “we’re just two mates out for a bite” tonight. “I’m not that good an actor, Sherlock,” John said. “Might be a few weeks before I can look at you without the cartoon hearts.” So it was sandwiches and crisps from the kitchen and bottles of lager laid in by Sally, consumed in front of the telly.

“What time’s your flight?” Sherlock asked, putting aside his plate.

John made a face. “Ten a.m.”

“Oh. You’ll have to be off right early, then.”

“I’ll get a cab.”

Sherlock hesitated. “I could drive you.”

“Absolutely not. There is no way I can stand to say goodbye to you in public, Sherlock.” He turned and looked at him. “God, I don’t want to go.”

“I’ll be there in a few weeks. No time at all. We can email and Skype in the meantime.”

“Mmm. Poor substitute.”

Sherlock got up and held out his hand. “Best make tonight count, then.”

John took it and let Sherlock pull him to his feet. “I intend to.”

Morning seemed to slam in with a vengeance, as it always did when one did not want it to come at all. The alarm on John’s mobile went off at half past six, but they were already awake. Sherlock’s hand scrabbled for the nightstand to turn off the insistent alarm as fast as possible so he could get his hands back on John’s hips. John chuckled, tossing his head back as he rode Sherlock slow and maddening, the early sunlight slanting in the window and smoothing over John’s skin like gold leaf, lighting his eyes from the side and making them glow cobalt blue. “John,” Sherlock groaned. “Oh, fuck yes, like that,” he said through clenched teeth.

John just smiled and rolled his hips in torturous circles and arcs. He leaned back and braced his hands on Sherlock’s legs, changing the angle and stretching his torso, his cock jutting hard from his groin. “You want to come like this?” he whispered, eyes shut.

“Yes,” Sherlock managed. He was continually amazed at how John was different every time they had sex. Last night he’d all but dragged Sherlock to bed and had fucked him on all fours, vigorously pounding him until Sherlock had to hang on to the headboard to brace himself. He had been loud and energetic and just rough enough to make it exciting, and they’d both come for England, but now he was quiet and soft and sleepy, riding Sherlock’s cock with a blissful expression as if he were enjoying a leisurely massage. “You first, though.”

Sherlock grasped John’s shaft in his hand and stroked, long slow pulls, taking his cue from his lover’s body language. John slowed his movements and let his head droop down, breathing harder now as Sherlock jerked him. It didn’t take long before he clenched his teeth and came onto Sherlock’s stomach, the pulses squeezing Sherlock’s cock inside him. He’d barely come down before he was back on the job, a little more forcefully now, clenching and thrusting down, leaning forward and pinning Sherlock in place with his eyes. He bent and kissed him, sucking on Sherlock’s lower lip.
“Fuck, John,” Sherlock panted. “God, your arse – so tight, you feel amazing.”

John grinned against Sherlock’s lips. “Come in me, Sherlock.”

“Yes…God, yes…”

“I want to watch you.” He stared down at Sherlock’s face and with another clench and thrust, Sherlock cried out his release, John never taking his eyes off him. “God, you’re beautiful like that,” John whispered, burying his face in Sherlock’s neck. “When you lose control and just let it go.”

Sherlock wrapped his arms around him, breathing hard, his brain not quite back online. “God, I love you.” It was all he could think to say, the lightest and most buoyant thought skinned from the top of his brain where it had risen to the surface while all else that might crowd it out was buried in the sediment for now.

John rolled off, dropping a kiss to Sherlock’s chest. “I think you like saying that.”

“Could be that I’m getting used to it.”

They lay together and basked in the afterglow for a time, but only a short time. The morning was getting away from them.

Showers and clothing and packing and breakfast, and before Sherlock knew it, it was eight o’clock and John’s car was downstairs waiting. They stood by the lift doors, fidgeting their weight from foot to foot. “Call me when you get there,” Sherlock said.

John nodded. “I will.” He lifted his eyes to Sherlock’s. “I hate this.”

“Agreed.” Sherlock reached out and pulled John into a hug. “Three weeks.”

He felt John nod. “Three weeks.” He drew back and tilted his face up. They kissed, a relatively chaste, see-you-soon kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

John stepped away and picked up his bag. “We’ll Skype later?”

“If you like.” Sherlock stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Safe trip.”

John nodded. “Bye, Sherlock.” He got into the lift, holding Sherlock’s eyes until the doors closed between them.

Sherlock went to the front window and watched until he saw John come out with his bag and get into the waiting car. He looked up towards 221B’s windows. Sherlock lifted a hand, although at this time of day from this angle, John wouldn’t be able to see him. John waved anyway. Then he got in the car, it drove off, and he was gone.

Sherlock turned around and surveyed his silent, empty flat. This flat did not contain a John, as it had not done for virtually all of the time he’d lived here, and yet it now felt incomplete without him.
The flight from London to Los Angeles was eleven hours long, give or take half an hour. Sherlock had sat through it more times than he could count, and it was always a trial keeping himself occupied while trapped in a seat. Today the flight seemed even more interminable knowing that John was on the other end of it. Sherlock was about ready to jump out of his skin with eagerness to see him again, eagerness which was heightened by the fact that his arrival would be unexpected. He’d managed to rearrange his schedule to leave London two days earlier than he’d planned, but he hadn’t told John. Harry was helping him orchestrate the surprise, and he couldn’t wait to see the look on John’s face.

He tried to sleep and couldn’t. He tried to read, but he was too distracted. He toyed with the idea of getting drunk but he wanted to be alert and sober when he landed. Eventually he settled on listening to music on his iPod.

Slowly, agonizingly, the flight passed.

Sherlock gathered up his carry-on and his laptop bag. He only ever traveled with a small suitcase; he had plenty of clothes at his LA condo and it saved him having to stand at baggage claim and thus increase the chances of photographers deciding he was their catch of the day. He nodded to the flight crew and was off up the jetway.

Harry was waiting for him at security. She grinned and waved and Sherlock found himself grinning back. “Welcome home!” she said.

“God, it’s good to be off that bloody plane.”

“C’mon, let’s be off. I saw a camp of cameras down the terminal. We might sneak by.”

Sadly, they did not. The moment they emerged onto the concourse, two photographers spotted him. They snapped photos, flashes going off in Sherlock’s face as they barked his name, trying to get him to turn or acknowledge them. Some photographers were known to shout really terrible insults and abuse, just to get a shot of some celebrity looking angry or shouting back, but these two just stuck to his name. Nor did they pursue him all the way out, which was also known to happen. They snapped a few shots and then went back to their roost.

“Not so bad,” Harry muttered.

“I’ve had worse.”

They made it to Harry’s car without incident. Sherlock put his bag in the back seat and got in. Harry got behind the wheel; Sherlock waited for her to start the car, but she just sat there. “Harry?”

“Oh God, it’s the don’t-hurt-my-brother speech. I suppose I’ll have to endure it eventually, might as well be now. “All right, then.” He sat quietly, waiting for his due.

She took a deep breath. “I’m not an emotional girl. I’m a snarky bitch, to be honest. But I love my brother more than anyone in the world. He’s the best man I know or ever expect to. It hurt my heart that he should be alone for so long, even if it was partially by choice. He deserves so much more, he deserves everything. So while I have you alone I just have to thank you.”
Sherlock looked at her, surprised. “Thank me?”

“Yes. For making John so happy. I’ve never seen him like this, it’s like someone finally found the light switch.” She smiled, and Sherlock was astonished to see tears in her eyes. “So thank you for not being afraid of it, for not running away from it.”

He sighed. “I was afraid. I still am. But your brother’s too much for me, Harry. I couldn’t turn away from him now if I wanted to.”

She patted his arm. “Probably not the speech you were expecting, was it?”

“I admit I assumed you were going to give me the ‘hurt him and I’ll murder you in your sleep’ speech.”

“Oh, Sherlock. We’re intelligent people. Surely you don’t need me to spell that out for you.” She started the car and they were off.

John lived in the Hollywood Hills. Sherlock had never been to his home, of course, as he and John had not become friends until the shoot in Toronto. He wasn’t sure what to expect. John wasn’t the sort to splash out for a glamorous house, although he surely could have afforded a mansion if he’d wanted one. He imagined it would be comfortable and practical, like John himself. Possibly a Colonial, even a sprawling ranch.

So when Harry turned into a steep semicircular drive onto a heavily wooded lot, Sherlock couldn’t help but stare in surprise at the house that sat at the top.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Harry said. He could hear her smile in her voice.

“It’s beautiful,” Sherlock said. It was a large lodge-style house, the exterior clad in timbers and river stones. It would not have look out of place in a pine forest on a mountaintop. Sherlock got out of the car, his admiration of the house cut short by the sight of John’s car in the drive and the abrupt knowledge that only a door separated them now.

“Come on,” Harry said, carrying his suitcase. “I’ll let you in, then I’ll faff off and leave you two alone.”

“Harry, I do appreciate your help with this.”

She smiled. “He’s going to be over the moon to see you.” She opened the front door and beckoned him inside, putting a “shh” finger to her lips.

Sherlock followed her in, and was immediately greeted by the smell of something delicious cooking. They’d barely gotten in the door before Sherlock heard John’s voice; just the sound of it made his stomach flip. “Harry?”

“Yeah, John, it’s me.”

“Did you bring the capers?”

“Yeah, I got them right here.” She handed Sherlock a jar of capers. “I brought you a surprise, too.”

“Oh?” he said, chuckling. “I hope it’s alcoholic. I’m hoping to pass out tonight and sleep until Friday.”

Harry nodded toward the sound of John’s voice. “He’s in the kitchen,” she whispered. “Go on,” she
said, giving him a nudge. Harry retreated to the door, gave him a wave, and left.

Sherlock squared his shoulders and headed for the kitchen. It was large and well-appointed, but that was as much of it as he registered, because his attention was riveted by the sight of John at the stove, his back to the entryway.

He’d been well aware when he hatched this plan that he might catch John totally unprepared for his arrival, perhaps sweaty from exercise or dirty from gardening, or wearing his most bedraggled old nylon shorts and a tattered undershirt. But as far as he could tell, John looked perfect. He was wearing a rather snug t-shirt and well-worn jeans that fit him perfectly in all the right ways. Over this, he was wearing an apron. The endearing sight of John in an apron, cooking something that smelled of lemon and garlic, was almost enough to make Sherlock drop the capers.

He leaned in the doorway, just watching for a moment. “I’m afraid I’m not alcoholic,” he said. “But if you’d like to sleep until Friday I might be able to find a way to wear you out.”

John dropped his wooden spoon with a clatter and whirled around, eyes wide. His mouth fell open when he saw him. Sherlock grinned helplessly, his mouth straining to stretch even wider and coming up against the design limitations of his face. “Sherlock!”

“Surprise,” Sherlock said. John’s answering grin lit up everything it touched; he bounded across the room and then Sherlock’s arms were full of him, gorgeously full of John. “I was able…” was all he got out before John’s mouth was on his, insistent. He surrendered without hesitation and kissed back, their tongues tangling, Sherlock’s arms wrapped around John’s back and feeling that glorious heft of him, muscle and bone and breath and pounding heart. John’s arms twined around Sherlock’s shoulders, one hand wandering up into his hair so that he couldn’t draw back even if he’d so wished. John pressed kisses to the corner of his mouth, his cheek, his jaw, his neck, and then buried himself again in Sherlock’s embrace, pressing his face into Sherlock’s throat. “John,” was all Sherlock could think to say.

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” John said. There was a clogged quality to his voice.

Sherlock pulled back and looked at John’s face, his watery eyes. “John, are you crying?”

“No!” He sniffed. “Maybe a little,” he said, blushing. “I’m just happy to see you. How are you here? I thought Friday!”

“I was able to rearrange my schedule to fly over a few days early. I thought I’d surprise you.”

John laughed, his hands rubbing Sherlock’s arms. “You surprised me, all right. Best surprise I’ve ever gotten.”

“I couldn’t wait any more.” He met John’s eyes.

John nodded, holding his gaze. “Well, you’re here now. No more waiting.”

Sherlock cupped John’s face in his hands. “No. No more waiting.” He leaned in and kissed him again, taking his time about it. John hung onto his forearms for a moment, then stepped closer and slid his arms around Sherlock’s waist. Sherlock turned them so John was against the wall; he pressed close, John giving it back as good as he was getting. John hooked one leg around Sherlock’s; Sherlock slid his hands down to John’s arse, seized him and lifted, bending his knees to scoop John’s hips up. John wound his legs around Sherlock’s waist, hitching himself higher with his arms around Sherlock’s shoulders. The changed angle shifted the tone, enabling John to press down and plunder Sherlock’s mouth. “Is this all right?” Sherlock managed to slip in.
“Doesn’t it feel all right?” John said, kissing Sherlock’s face.

“It isn’t – I don’t know. Emasculating?”

John’s tongue flickered out, wetting his lips. “Do I feel emasculated to you?” He gripped the back of Sherlock’s neck and bucked their hips together; Sherlock felt John’s erection rub against his own.

“Quite the opposite.”

“Good. You won’t be asking if I’m emasculated later, when I’m fucking you,” John growled into his ear.

Sherlock groaned and yanked John’s head back, baring his throat to Sherlock’s lips and teeth. He sucked on the pulse point and pulled on the neck of John’s t-shirt to get to his collarbone. John just hung on to his head, rocking their hips together while Sherlock braced his feet and pressed forward so he could support John’s weight. John dragged his face up again and kissed him, deep and thorough, his hands on Sherlock’s neck. He broke off to catch his breath and let his forehead rest against Sherlock’s; they stayed like that for a few moments, calming themselves. “God, I missed you,” Sherlock whispered.

“I missed you too, every second,” John breathed. He lowered his legs and slid back down to the floor. “I was cooking dinner for myself and Harry, but I’m guessing she’s scarpered. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I think I am. What is that you’re making? It smells good.”

John flapped a hand. “Nothing specific. Just throwing some shrimp in with lemon and garlic and – say, where are those capers?”

Sherlock smiled and rescued the jar from where it was fallen and rolled under the cabinet. “Here you are.”

John took them, kissing Sherlock again as he did so. He moved back to the stove to stir the food. “Make yourself at home. You are, after all. Home, that is.”

Sherlock opened the fridge. “Shall we open this wine?”

“What’s that, the pinot grigio? Yes, please.”

Sherlock uncorked the bottle and took wineglasses from the rack. He poured two glasses and handed one to John, who clinked it against Sherlock’s. “Cheers.”

“To being home,” Sherlock said.

John nodded, looking at him with soft eyes. “Indeed.”

They talked about the flight and Sherlock’s moving plans as John cooked. Sherlock’s attention was rather diverted by watching him. There was efficiency in the way John moved around the kitchen, wasting no motion, never hesitating over anything. His t-shirt pulled against his body as he moved and Sherlock found himself captivated by his easy competence. “I didn’t know you could cook so well.”

He shrugged. “I’ve been cooking for myself most of my adult life. I got bored with standard fare right off, so I started experimenting. I’d throw together whatever struck my fancy, and sometimes it turned out and sometimes not. I got to know what went well with what, how to put things together.”
He looked up to see Sherlock watching him. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, smirking.

Sherlock harrumphed, looking away, a bit embarrassed to have been caught out. “I enjoy watching you cook. It’s – sexy.”

“Really?” John said, chuckling. “I’m not feeling terribly alluring just now, in this apron, with oil spatters on my shirt.” He stepped closer and kissed him quickly, tasting of the Pinot. “Although it is a bit brilliant, cooking for sexy boyfriend.” He went back to the stove. Within a few minutes he’d put the sauce aside to reduce and had pasta boiling. He took off the apron. “That’ll be ten minutes or so, let me show you around the house.” He picked up his wine and led Sherlock back out into the living room. “It’s rather a lot of house for one person, but I love it.”

“It’s very you. I couldn’t picture you in one of those ultra-modern glass-walled affairs that are so thick on the ground here.”

“God, no. I like wood and leather and green and comfort.” He walked Sherlock through the living room, the dining room, a den in the back, the huge wraparound porch, the screening room and the downstairs loo. “I’ve been getting things ready for you.”

“Ready? Does your house require Sherlock-proofing?”

John laughed. “I wanted you to have your own space. I cleared out one of the guest rooms upstairs for you.” He opened a door and Sherlock stepped through, blinking in surprise. “I thought you might use this as a den or an office.”

John had furnished the large room with rugs and leather furniture that reminded Sherlock of what he had in 221B. Bookshelves had been set up, along with a desk and a computer. “John,” he said. “I’m touched. You went to some trouble for this.”

“Don’t give me too much credit, I barely lifted a finger. I told Harry what I wanted and she made calls and then it happened.”

“But you thought of it. I confess I might not have done the same.”

“I know I need my own space, Sherlock. It’s reasonable that you might, too. We can’t be always in each other’s pockets, we’ll drive each other mad.”

“A logical assumption.” He turned to John and smiled. “But what if I want to spend as much time with you as possible?”

John grinned. “I have no problem with that. For now. But we’re – we’re living together. It’s exciting for now, but there’ll come a time that we’ll have to respect each other’s boundaries. We’ve both lived alone for a long time. It’s going to be an adjustment, and we ought to be realistic about that.” He must have seen something on Sherlock’s face, because he reached out and pulled him close by his hips. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not over the moon that you’re here,” he said.

Sherlock smiled down at him, then reached up and combed his fingers through John’s silky hair. “Time affects human visual memory on a logarithmic curve,” he said, pitching his voice low in a way he knew John found arousing. “Our recollections dim faster than the time passes since our last sighting of a familiar face.”

John looked a little bemused. “Which means what, exactly?”

“You’re even more bloody gorgeous than I remembered.”
John’s eyes went darker, his pupils dilating. “Why don’t I show you the bedroom?”

“You mean our bedroom?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” John took his hand and led him down the hall to a large master suite. Sherlock barely glanced around before he had John in his arms again, lips slotting together and hands at each other’s clothing.

“John, the dinner.”

“Oh, fuck the dinner,” John growled, attacking him. He pulled Sherlock down onto the bed and rolled them over so Sherlock was on the bottom. John dragged his mouth down Sherlock’s neck, opening his shirt as he kissed his way down onto his chest. Sherlock’s head thrust against the mattress, his neck arching at the touch of John’s lips on his skin. He sighed. “I don’t deserve all this, you know.”

“Deserve it? It isn’t about deserving anything, you daft git. I want this to be your home, too. Why shouldn’t I do what I can to make you feel comfortable?”

Sherlock dragged him up so he could look into his face again “It isn’t the things you surround me with that’ll make me comfortable, John. It’s you.”

John smiled, his eyes twinkling. “So I should cancel the Jaguar I bought you?”

Sherlock cleared his throat, arching an eyebrow. “Well, let’s not be too hasty.” They kissed again, chuckling against each other’s mouths. Jaguar? Sherlock pulled back abruptly. “You are kidding about the Jaguar, aren’t you?”

John rolled his eyes. “Yes, Sherlock, I’m kidding. Buying you a couch and a desk is one thing, but a two hundred thousand dollar car is quite another.”

John woke the next morning at eight. The knot of excitement in his belly was still there, the one he’d had for the past week in anticipation of Sherlock’s arrival. Wait, did I dream that? He turned over and there was Sherlock, asleep next to him. He relaxed. Seemed his subconscious hadn’t yet gotten the memo that the wait was over.

He lifted a finger and skimmed it gently down Sherlock’s pale cheek. Seeing him standing there in the kitchen the night before had been a shock, the best kind of shock. He’d have to thank Harry later, surely she’d had a hand in arranging it. He and Sherlock had eaten dinner together in the breakfast nook after their impromptu bedroom romp. He had worried that once Sherlock was here, there would be awkwardness. Would they be able to talk? Would they be easy with each other? Granted, it was only the first night, but so far those fears seemed groundless. There had been no awkwardness, they had talked easily and freely, and when they’d retired to the den to watch “Project Runway,” teasing each other over the cliché, it felt like something they’d done a thousand times. Going up the stairs to bed together, fingers intertwined and anticipation flowing between them, John couldn’t help but feel that it was all fine, everything was fine, he had the man he loved in his house and in his bed.

Except it wasn’t fine, none of it was fine, and only the passage of time would reveal just now not fine it was going to be. But he didn’t want to think about that now. They’d have to face reality on Monday, when they’d start their ADR work on To a Stranger and likely come face to face with their colleagues for the first time since the shoot had wrapped. He was fully expecting a phone call from Jim Schamus, asking them in for a serious meeting to discuss The Situation. They knew. Of course they knew. They always knew everything. Sally had told them how Anderson had come looking for
them while they were in Sussex. They’d heard nothing else since, but he supposed it was easy enough to ignore the issue while they were separated by an ocean. Now, with both of them in Los Angeles and living in the same bloody house, the studio would have concerns. They’d likely have demands. Worries about what they might ask, threaten or cajole plagued him. John knew actors who’d had to sign nondisclosure agreements that they would not reveal their sexuality or other aspects of their personal life. He didn’t know what he’d do if he and Sherlock were asked to sign such a document.

*How can I ask him to do this? How can I ask him to hide? How can I ask it of myself? He’s happy, I’m happy, why does it all have to be so bloody fucked up?*

It didn’t matter that they were happy. It was fucked up, no question, but that was the way of it.

He’d made good on his promise last night and had shagged Sherlock cross-eyed, the act sweetened by the knowledge that this was their bed now, their home, and fast though it may have been, it felt right, as if this house had been waiting for years to house another soul, the right soul, and its very beams and joists had sighed in fulfillment. The act had been new again in another way, as well. Over the last three weeks they’d both been re-tested and had swapped medical reports. They were both clear. So last night they’d come together without any barriers between them.

Poor Sherlock. He’d be jetlagged for a few days. He didn’t need much sleep, but right now he seemed to be out like a light. John slipped quietly out of bed, went to the loo and got his laptop. He booted up and read the trades while Sherlock slept on at his side. He skimmed through the usual news of people changing agencies and signing to new projects and books being optioned until he got to something that caught his eye; a review of *For Which It Stands*, the new Oliver Stone film that would open today. He read it with some trepidation.

The film is a stirring portrayal of the trials of veterans and the adjustment they face returning to civilian life. Breathtaking desert cinematography and sharp writing are well served by Stone, at his most intimate and emotional, but what elevates the film is the transcendent performance of James Moriarty in the central role of disabled Marine veteran Toby McTeague. Moriarty, sporting a pitch-perfect American accent and wholly inhabiting his character’s guilt, indignance and post-traumatic stress, is peeled like an onion throughout the film, revealing ever-deeper spheres of secrecy and shame. Moriarty is an absolute shoo-in for an Oscar nomination.

John sighed. That didn’t exactly fill him with joy. John was one hundred percent certain that Sherlock would also be nominated this year (he was less certain about himself, no matter what anyone said about it) and he didn’t relish having to listen to Sherlock rant about competing with Moriarty for the prize.

Sherlock stirred and rolled over, wriggling closer to John’s warmth. He shifted about until he was tucked against John’s side, his head resting on John’s bicep. John ducked his head and kissed his mussed curls. “Mmmph,” Sherlock said.

“Good morning.”

“What’re you reading?”

“Review of Moriarty’s new film.”

Sherlock lifted his head and peered blearily at the screen. “What’s it say?”

“That it’s – wait, I want to get this right – a triumph of modern American filmmaking, Moriarty is transcendent and a shoo-in for a nomination.”
Sherlock made a disgruntled noise. “Of course he is, that film is the most blatant Oscar bait I’ve ever seen in my life. I read the script. He’s got about four long, dramatic monologues in which he pounds desks and foams at the mouth, and that’s on top of the three sobbing-breakdown scenes. And all of this with a prosthetic limb. Tiresome.”

“Bad news for us. Our film is subtler.”

“This town has not forgiven Oliver Stone for – well, being Oliver Stone. They won’t rush to reward his pet project, especially when he’s bound to be accused of just rehashing Born on the Fourth of July. Which he is.”

“They might reward Moriarty, though.”

Sherlock took the laptop and shoved it away down the bed so he could burrow closer into John’s arms, tossing one leg and one arm across him. “Don’t want to think about him. You’re much cozier, and less annoying.”

John slid down in the bed a bit and wrapped him up, chuckling. “Why do you two hate each other so much?”

“He’s insufferable and a dreadful actor.”

“He’d probably say the same about you.”

“Yes, but he would be wrong and I am right.” Sherlock sighed. “We were at RADA together. He used to employ various means to advance his career that weren’t exactly cricket. I exposed him and cost him a role he badly wanted. We’ve been up for the same role three times. Once I got it, once he did, and once neither of us did. The role that he won out over me was that Russell picture, the one about the missionaries?”

“God, that was awful.”

“Yes. Somehow that’s my fault, too.”

“What was the role you won out over him?”

“It was Kanisza. And he’s still bitter.”

“He would not have been good in that, not like you were.”

“Terrence agreed. But we’re both on his little list, or so it seems.” Sherlock snaked a hand down to John’s crotch, his warm lips leaving footprints on John’s neck. “No more shop talk in bed. I seem to recall someone expressing a fondness for morning sex, or did I just imagine it?”

John was at the mirror shaving when Sherlock emerged from the shower. He sniffed the air. “Is that coffee I’m smelling?”

“I believe it is.”

“Is Harry here, then?”

John smiled, but it was a suspicious, I’ve-got-a-secret smile. “No. That isn’t Harry.”

They dressed and went downstairs. Sitting at the kitchen island was a sharply-dressed woman on a Blackberry, drinking coffee. “Making yourself at home, I see,” John said to her. Sherlock’s eyes
ticked off observations of her and John’s reaction to her. *Hollywood power broker, behind-the-scenes, married but keeps it a secret, native of the East Coast, possibly New York but more probably New Jersey.*

*My new manager and publicist, in other words.*

“Well,” she said, dusting off her hands. “Look who decided to join us. The rest of us have been up getting shit done. Tell me, which of you is it that makes the really entertaining moose-mating-call noise when you’re coming?”

Sherlock just stood there, experiencing a heretofore unsuspected condition: speechlessness. John chuckled. “Sherlock, I’d like you to meet my -- *our,* that is, publicist and manager, Irene Adler.”

She got up and shook Sherlock’s hand, a two-pump professional handshake. “We’ve got a lot of work to do, gentlemen, so I thought we’d better get an early start.”

“May we at least have coffee first?” Sherlock said, arching one elegant eyebrow. “Your Majesty?”

She smirked. “I’ll allow it. Just this once.”

They reconvened at the table in the breakfast nook off the kitchen, John with coffee and toast, Sherlock with just coffee. Irene was typing on her Blackberry while hardly looking at the keys, a feat that was impressive even to Sherlock, himself an avid texter.

“All right,” she said. “First off, I think you guys are smart to consolidate your management. With all the maneuvering we’re going to be doing in the next six months, I would have spent half my life on the phone with your manager and your publicist, Sherlock. If I handle both your schedules and press, we’ll cut down on the chance that something will slip through the cracks and save me tons of time.”

Sherlock nodded. “That was our logic as well.”

“Second, you guys are also really stupid.”

John and Sherlock glanced at each other. “We’re smart *and* stupid?” John said.

“The two are not mutually exclusive. The decision to consolidate will have implications to those in the know. It’s a very *coupleish* arrangement. I may have a way around that. But I was actually referring to this.” She pulled out her iPad and showed them a photo of Sherlock at the airport the day before.

“Me at the airport.”

“Yes. You at the airport all over the Internet.”

“So?”

She sighed. “Who are you *with,* Sherlock?”

“Harry.”

“So you arrived in Los Angeles and were picked up by John Watson’s sister.”

John stared. “They know who Harry is?” Sherlock was kicking himself. Of course they knew who she was. He ought to have anticipated that.

“They know everything, John. Always assume that everyone knows absolutely everything. You’ll
be safer that way. This is the kind of thing we can’t afford.” Irene folded her hands on the table and fixed them each in turn with a stern gaze. “If you’re serious about keeping your relationship under wraps until after the Oscars, I can do that. But you must do what I say, when I say it. I tell you to wear hipwaders, you ask what color. I’ll do what I can to make sure you can lead normal lives, but from now until March, this is your job. You got that?”

Sherlock’s hackles were rising in spite of himself. He recognized the necessity of Irene’s dictums, but he rebelled against being told what to do. It was just his nature. John grabbed his hand. “We’ve got it,” John said, forestalling Sherlock’s objections.

“Good. From now on, you two do not leave this house together. It’s bad enough that you’re living here, Sherlock, but if we’re lucky that won’t become common knowledge. You do not eat in public together, you don’t go for runs together, you don’t ride in the same car, you don’t go to the same parties. The only places you are allowed to go together are appointments and events related to the film where you’ll be expected to be together. Given the nature of this film, almost all of your publicity and press will be done as a pair. Aside from that, you are not to be seen together, at all, full stop. No grocery shopping, no outings to the beach, nothing. Your relationship is to stay within these four walls.”

Sherlock’s heart was sinking even further. He’d known that this was what would be required, but to hear Irene spell it out so starkly was depressing. He’d come here to be with the man he loved. Now it looked like they’d be kept apart like teenagers on a chaperoned date. John looked just as miserable. “What if we want to – get away?” he asked.

“That can be arranged. I will make the arrangements and you won’t question them. I’ll send you someplace private where you won’t be disturbed or observed. I’ll send you there as often as you like if it will help you carry out the rest of the plan, all right?” She sighed, and her face softened a little. “Listen, I understand how much it’s going to suck. I’ll try and help you through it. But my first priority is maintaining your secrecy until such time as you tell me you don’t want me to anymore.”

“I think the studio knows already,” Sherlock said.

“Of course they know. You can’t keep this from your colleagues, or from the journalists. Your only goal is to keep it from the public. The best I can do is promise you that no actual journalist will ever ask you about the rumors, and no one will ever print those rumors. I can’t control the paparazzi or any of these blogging yahoos who claim to be journalists, they’ll print what they want. But you know the rule of the Internet: pics or it didn’t happen. I’ve got one of my sneakest assistants scouring every single vantage point from which you could conceivably see this house to check if anyone could ever get a telephoto shot. Anything he finds, we’ll block off.” She took a deep breath, then offered them a bit of a smile. “I don’t want to make things any harder for you than they have to be. I’m happy for you, honestly. I may sound like a ballbusting hardass, but I’m a romantic at heart.” She smiled. “My husband will back me up on that.”

John’s mouth dropped open. “I didn’t know you were married!” Sherlock kept his mouth shut. Irene had been John’s manager and publicist for five years. She was obviously skilled at hiding her own relationship, although she hadn’t fooled Sherlock. Few could.

“No, nor does anyone else. My husband and I prefer it that way. So when you wonder if I’m capable of engineering this façade for the two of you, remember that I’ve managed to keep anyone from knowing that I’ve been married for eight years.” She eyed them with a speculative expression. “What we really need is a girlfriend for Sherlock.”

Sherlock froze. John’s hand clamped down on his. “No. Absolutely not,” John said, an edge to his voice that Sherlock had rarely heard there. “Out of the question.”
“John, it would help deflect questions about him living here.”

“Why for me?” Sherlock asked.

“John’s too close to his breakup with Sarah. And he’s – well, to be frank, he’s known for being amiable and attractive to women. You’re not. If you got a girlfriend, people would be less likely to assume it was a casual thing, because you just don’t do that.”

John was shaking his head. “We could never get anyone on such short notice.”

“No. It’d have to be me.”

“You?” John exclaimed.

“Yes. That would also provide an explanation as to why he’s left his manager and his publicist and signed with me, one that doesn’t involve him sleeping with you.”

“But you’re married!”

“You didn’t know that until four minutes ago, and neither will anyone else.”

Sherlock was dubious. “You as my girlfriend? No one would accept it.”

“They’ll accept what I put before them, and they’ll like it.” She looked at them, and seemed to take pity. “We’ll deal with that later. You two are clear until Monday. You’re due at the ADR studio at nine a.m. and then Focus wants a meeting with you at five. I assume it’s about this,” she said, making a vague motion in the air in their direction. “I will be in the meeting as well, so try not to worry about it.”

John snorted. “Good luck.”

“I don’t need to tell you to stay in this weekend, do I?”

“No.”

“If you want to get out of town, call me and I can have it set up in an hour.” Irene looked at her watch. “I have got to be off. It looks like Entertainment Weekly wants to do a big story on the film, with you two on the cover. I’ll be setting up a joint interview and a photoshoot, probably for the end of September.”

John nodded. He looked numb. Sherlock could sympathize. They got up and walked with Irene to the door. “Thanks for all this, Irene,” John said. “I know it’s a huge pain in the arse.”

“John, this is why you pay me. It’s just business. It’s much worse for you, this is your life.” She looked from John’s face to Sherlock’s. “I admit, I hate that this is necessary. You both looked so happy when you came downstairs, and now – not so much.”

“As you say, the necessity is disheartening,” Sherlock said, taking John’s hand again. “We’ll manage.”

“All right. Call me if anything comes up, otherwise enjoy your weekend, and remember what I said. I’ll see you on Monday.” She let herself out.

They just stood there in the entryway for a moment. Sherlock let go of John’s hand and walked a few steps away, rubbing his face. The urge to slap on a few nicotine patches was strong, but he resisted. “John, I think – I need some time alone.”
“Me, too.”

“Is there a gym?”

John got out his wallet and handed Sherlock a membership card with his name on it. “Harry set you up at my gym. Take my car.”

“I’ll call a cab. I shouldn’t be seen driving your car.”

“God, they can’t possibly know my car.”

“They can and they do. Remember what Irene said? Assume everyone knows everything?” He even found himself wishing he were at a different gym than John’s.

“All right, then.” John turned and disappeared down the hall into the den.

Sherlock got his gym clothes together, called a cab, and within half an hour was on a treadmill, pounding out his frustrations with his iPod blaring the Beastie Boys into his ears, numbing him to the surroundings. He ran until his thighs burned, then he got off the treadmill and did two circuits of free weights until the sweat poured off him.

At one point the manager came over to welcome him. Sherlock glanced around and saw that all the other clients – all of them clearly well-to-do locals, including a few other actors he recognized – had been giving him the side-eye the whole time and he hadn’t noticed. He exchanged the required pleasantries with the manager and made his excuses, calling for a cab to pick him up in twenty minutes as he headed for the showers.

He returned to John’s (their) house feeling much more centered, ready to talk, ready to deal.

He barely had the door closed behind him when John called out to him. “Sherlock?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

Hurried footsteps, and then John appeared in the entry, looking excited. “They sent the first trailer.”

“Did you watch it?”

“No, I wanted to wait for you. Come on!” John turned and hurried back the way he’d come. Sherlock dropped his bag and followed along to John’s office. He leaned over John in his chair and watched the monitor as John queued up the trailer.

They both went entirely still. The Universal Studios, then Focus Features logos came and went. There was no spoken dialogue. The score was a sparse guitar and violin; Sherlock didn’t recognize it, although it sounded like the work of Andrew Bird, the singer/songwriter who was composing the equally sparse musical score for the film. The cinematography was even more stunning than he’d hoped. Each shot was a masterwork of light and shadow, color-desaturated and stark. John’s face in each shot was a study in stillness, in subtle play of expression. His own face was angular and alien.

The story was teased in a series of very brief clips, five to ten seconds each. Benjamin and Mark meeting in the waiting room, at opposite ends of a couch. A phone call in a park. An embrace, a sleepy wake-up, an angry mother, a funeral. A startling splash of blood, surprisingly vivid on the wall.

Sherlock held his breath while the two minutes of film played. The title card at the end, all lower-
case, floating near the bottom, then their two names drifting past each other in the opposite corner of the screen. December 2011.

The file ended. Without a word, John restarted it and they watched it again.

When it ended the second time, John just sat there. Sherlock turned and sat on the edge of the desk. John looked up at him, rawness in his eyes. “That is why we’re doing this, John,” Sherlock said.

He nodded. “We owe this film. We owe it everything.”

Sherlock reached out and took his hand. “This isn’t going to break us. We can do this.”

John leaned forward, both Sherlock’s hands in his now, his eyes on their clasped fingers. “Sherlock, I know you don’t want to hide. I know you’re doing it for me. I don’t know how to make it up to you, but I will make you a serious promise.” He looked up and met his eyes. “If it ever came down to keeping the secret or keeping you, that isn’t a choice for me. You come first. We come first. Always.”

Sherlock felt the knot inside him loosen just a little. “I know that, John.”

“Good. I just wanted you to hear me say it.”

“Thank you.”

John glanced at the monitor. “This film is going to be very special. I have to believe it’ll be worth it.”

Sherlock nodded. “It will be.”

John stood up and embraced him. “I love you,” he said into Sherlock’s ear.

Sherlock gripped him tightly. He wouldn’t let go, not for anything or anyone. “I love you too, John. More than I can say.” He hoped that didn’t sound trite; it was the literal truth. He could hold forth on just about any topic one could choose and articulate an eloquent explanation of a variety of opinions, phenomena and theories, but he found that he quite lacked the command of language he’d need to fully articulate how he felt about John Watson. His experience of life so far had not prepared him for this and he found himself often blown off-course by its intensity.

But Sherlock Holmes was nothing if not resourceful. If he could not tell John how he felt, he’d just have to conduct himself in such a way that John would know.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I forgot to post the visual aid for John’s house on the previous chapter, so here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Monday rolled around, John felt that he and Sherlock were settling into their cohabitation. Thanks to Harry, most of Sherlock’s clothes had migrated from his condo into the large closet in the master suite, which John’s own collection of clothes could never hope to fill, and his toiletries had taken up residence in their bathroom. Books were gradually filling the shelves in Sherlock’s den, and his computer was set up on his desk. It made John smile to come home and see Sherlock’s jacket on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, his half-empty teacup in the sink, and that strange brand of plain yogurt he liked in the fridge.

It was just – working. They fit comfortably in their bed, they fit comfortably on the couch in the den, they moved around each other in the kitchen like they’d been doing it all their lives. It boggled John’s mind that they’d only been together for what was, in reality, a very short time when it felt to him as if it had been ages.

Which just made it feel even stranger for them to rise, have breakfast and coffee, and then get in their separate cars – each of which had had its windows tinted over the weekend – to drive to the ADR studios. John didn’t even see Sherlock when he arrived, he was just shown into his own booth by the ADR director and got to work. When they broke for lunch he went down the street to a popular local
café; he sat inside and ate a sandwich and read his Kindle, signing a couple of autographs along the way. He went back to the studios and went back to work. He saw Sherlock’s car in the parking lot but did not see the man himself until the day’s recording was done (there’d be two more days after this one) and emerged to find Sherlock waiting for him. He had to resist the urge to kiss him hello. “What are you doing here?”

Sherlock put his book in his briefcase and stood up. “I finished about ten minutes ago, so I thought I’d wait for you. I don’t care what Irene says, I want us to go to this meeting together. We have no secrets from the studio, they already know.”

John nodded. “All right. I’ll drive.”

Sherlock agreed with a terse nod. They left the building together, a safe three feet of space between them, and got into John’s car. The moment they were safe behind the tinted windows they both turned and grabbed each other, sharing an urgent, hard-edged kiss, frustration lining it with sharpness. John gave Sherlock’s rather delectable lower lip one last suck and pulled back. “I needed that,” he said.

“As did I.”

They sighed in mutual resignation. John started the car and off they went.

Focus Features had their production offices in New York, so they’d be going to the offices of Focus’s parent company, Universal Studios. They pulled up to the gate and gave their names; they were expected. John drove to the low, unremarkable office building and found a parking spot. Neither the public nor journalists ever came to places like this; here they need not worry about being seen together. No actor, extra or production crew member would ever out them to the press, not if they wanted to keep their job. The conspiracy of silence in Hollywood wasn’t just about being in the closet. You’d walk a long way before you met an actor without a secret that he or she was hiding from the public, whether it was a child they wanted to keep safe from the limelight, an affair they were shoving under the rug, a same-sex lover or even, in one case that John knew of, a past life as the opposite gender. He also knew of a very well-liked actor who cultivated a nice-guy image and who spent quite a bit of time and money hiding a past that included several domestic violence convictions. Appearances were so often deceiving. Several actors he knew who were viewed as jerks by the public were in actuality perfectly nice and decent, but had grabbed the wrong end of the publicity stick and hadn’t been able to shake it off.

The point was that no one would dare tell anyone else’s secrets, because everyone had secrets of their own.

Irene was waiting for them in the lobby, with Greg Lestrade on one side of her and Mike Stamford on the other. The three of them were conferring intently, but all of them looked up as their clients entered. “I see you three are getting along famously,” Sherlock said.

“Oh yes, we’re a bloody efficient little talent management team, we are,” Greg said, wryly.

“I must say it’s a far sight easier dealing with one manager and publicist instead of four,” Mike added.

“Well, it would take four men to do the work of one me,” Irene said. “How are you guys?”

“We’re all right,” John said.

“Anxious to get this over with,” Sherlock grumbled.
She nodded. “Do you want us to do the talking?”

“No,” John said, seeing Sherlock nod in agreement out of the corner of his eye. “You can jump in if necessary, but this is our issue and we’ll deal with it.”

“Good.” She sighed. “Well, let’s go. The quicker this is over the sooner we can go get drinks afterwards.”

“God, yes,” John said.

They were shown to a conference room. There were fewer people than John had feared. Jim Schamus and Anderson were there along with a suit that he didn’t recognize – probably an exec from Universal – and another who was obviously a lawyer. John’s eyes narrowed to see him there, visions of nondisclosure contracts dancing in his head. He glanced over at Mike and saw the same thought on his face. Mike shot him a look and a minute head-shake.

Jim smiled and shook their hands. “John, Sherlock, it’s great to see you again.” More handshakes all around.

“You as well, Jim.” They all took seats, filling the smallish conference table.

“What did you think of the theatrical trailer?”

“We loved it,” John said. “It’s entirely appropriate, very evocative.”

“We’re making sure that the promotional materials match the tone of the actual film,” Jim said. “No bait and switch here. We’ll be releasing the trailer on the film’s website this evening, and it’ll go into theaters this weekend.” He sighed. “I wish that’s all we were here to discuss.” He glanced at the besuited man to his left. “This is Donald Metcalfe, from Universal, and this is Roger McWilliams, one of their attorneys. I’d like to make it clear that this discussion is taking place at their insistence, not at mine.”

John appreciated the disclaimer, which would no doubt not endear Jim to the higher-ups at Universal.

“Mr. Holmes, Mr. Watson,” Metcalfe said. He didn’t seem evil or menacing, but then they never did until you were way past the point of extrication. “We are here to address the nature of your relationship. I won’t ask you the exact nature of that relationship, as I think we all know what we’re talking about.”

“You don’t have to ask,” Sherlock said, in his lowest, most silkenly frosty tone. “We’ll be glad to tell you. John and I are together. We will not hide from you, although we understand the necessity of concealing our relationship from the public and the press.”

Metcalfe nodded, looking relieved. “Good. I’m glad you’re on board with that. It’s distasteful for everyone that we have to involve ourselves in a private matter, but this film’s release must not be compromised by sensationalistic media coverage.”

“You don’t have to spell it out for us,” John said, tightly. “We’ve both been working in this business for our entire adult lives. We understand the stakes. This film is very important to both of us, and neither of us wants to do anything to detract from its release. We have discussed this, and while we aren’t willing to hide forever, we agree that we will keep our relationship a secret until after the Oscars.”

Metcalfe and McWilliams exchanged a glance. “That’s excellent. Precisely what we were going to...”
“propose.”

“Good,” John said. “Then we’re done here.”

“One moment, please. If you’ve already agreed to this, you won’t mind signing a document to that effect?”

“No,” Sherlock growled. “We’re not signing anything.”

McWilliams spoke up for the first time. “Mr. Holmes, if we have nothing in writing, how is the studio to have any recourse if this agreement is not honored?”

“You won’t,” Greg said. “You’ll be relying on their discretion. It’s in their best interests to honor the agreement in the first place.”

“That isn’t satisfactory,” Metcalfe said.

“It will have to be,” John said, controlling his temper with difficulty.

Greg spoke up again. “Suppose, Mr. Metcalfe, that Sherlock and John were to be outed through no action of their own? They are being as careful as it’s possible to be, but they are only human and something may be overlooked even when they are honoring the agreement in good faith.”

“What if we had to make a choice?” John said. “What if one of us were hurt in an accident, God forbid, and the other had to choose between seeing his partner and maintaining our confidentiality? If I had to choose between Sherlock and this film, much as the film means to me, I’m afraid Sherlock wins, hands down. I will not sign anything that will legally proscribe us from revealing the truth about what we are to each other if it were to become urgent that we do so.”

Irene cleared her throat. “This is all so much smoke-filled bullshit, gentlemen. We all know that you have no way to legally compel them to sign so much as an autograph. Their contracts detailing their compensation for this film, including back-end points, are already signed and cannot be altered.”

“We cannot alter their signed contracts, but we can ensure that they are never offered another,” Metcalfe said.

Mike laughed. “You go ahead and do that, Donald. I daresay there are a few other studios who’d love to employ either of them.”

Irene wasn’t done. “And if this film is even half as good or successful as it’s shaping up to be, you’ll be down on your hands and knees begging their forgiveness for your inexcusable demands and pleading with them to please pretty please with sugar on top star in whatever project strikes their fancy.”

Metcalf cleared his throat. “We can make things very difficult for them.”

“You can, but you won’t.” Irene smiled. “Because if you do, I will make things very, very difficult for you, and we both know that I can.”

He held her gaze for a moment, then, to John’s amazement, looked away first. She had him. John didn’t know how or why and he didn’t want to know. “It’s not just us who would be less than pleased if this comes out at the wrong time,” Metcalfe said.

“We know that,” John snapped. “We aren’t stupid, you know. We have a plan as to when to make our announcement.”
Metcalfe sighed. “That announcement could drastically damage your future marketability. I like you both as actors. The early cuts of *To a Stranger* are – I hardly know what to say. It’s an amazing film you’ve made. I’d hate to see you throw away your careers on…”

“On what, Mr. Metcalfe?” Sherlock said. “On our future together? On the truth?” He reached out and took John’s hand where it rested on the tabletop. “Since it seems we’re all on the same page here, I just want to make one thing absolutely clear. John and I love each other. It is no one’s business but our own. You may make whatever judgments or proclamations you see fit. But I will not stand for anyone interfering, sabotaging or otherwise meddling with us. Is that clear?” The other men in the room exchanged uncertain glances, but no one spoke. “Good.”

John was squeezing Sherlock’s hand hard, mostly to keep himself from gazing at him in abject adoration. “Let’s go home,” he said.

Sherlock nodded briskly. “I think we’re through here.”

John couldn’t stop staring. He quite literally could not look away. He’d never seen anything so captivating. “She’s so – tiny,” he marveled, his eyes glued to the infant on his lap, her miniature fists clutching at his fingers.

Sarah smiled from where she and Anthea were sort of slumped against each other on the couch. They looked blissed-out, but exhausted. “She’s even two pounds bigger than she was when she was born,” Sarah said.

“She gained two pounds in ten days?” John said, amazed.

“She’s supposed to. She has room to grow now, and isn’t all folded up inside,” Anthea added.

“Look at her tiny little fingers!”

“Everybody fixates on the fingers,” Sarah mused.

“We did too, when she was born,” Anthea reminded her.

“They’re amazing,” John said, looking at little Sophie’s impossibly small fingernails. “They’re just so complete and perfect.”

“Just like she is,” Sarah sighed.

John smiled up at them. “I’m sorry it’s taken me this long to come see her.”

“That’s all right. We haven’t been terribly keen for visitors. And it sounds like you’ve been otherwise engaged. Where is your better half, anyway?”

“He’s in San Francisco. He’s on the boards of several performing arts schools, including the San Francisco School of the Arts. He’s gone up to do a two-day drama masterclass.”

Sarah blinked, looking surprised. “I’d have never picked him to take an interest in arts education.”

“He is full of surprises,” John said, still distracted by the tiny rosebud mouth and wide, goggling eyes of baby Sophie. “I would have gone with him, but – well, you know.”

She nodded, looking at him with sympathy on her face. It was two weeks since Sherlock had arrived in the States. At least six months to go. John wasn’t sure he’d last. It was worse than he’d feared it would be.
Anthea got up and plucked the baby from his lap. “I better put her down,” she said, glancing at Sarah. John saw a clear signal pass between them, but he wasn’t sure what it meant.

The moment she was gone, Sarah joined him on the couch. “John, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about what’s going on. We haven’t had time to get together.”

“It’s been a bit hectic, to say the least. And you with your new baby.” He smiled. “She’s beautiful. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you. We’re pretty ecstatic ourselves. Tired, but ecstatic. John – I’m not going to say I told you so, in spite of all the smack you used to talk about how gay actors should just come out, already.”

He shook his head. “You’d be well justified. I deserve it.”

“Glass houses and such, luv. You don’t see us rushing to come out, do you?”

“You’re waiting, like we are. It’s horrible.”

“Now I see Sherlock’s being linked with Irene, of all people?”

“That’s the plan. He’s going to take her to a few premieres and such. Then when we come out we can tell the truth, that he just took Irene out a few times for company because he couldn’t take me. We considered the full put-up job, having them act like they’re mad for each other, but – none of us were really very keen for that. Besides, we’d have had to lie about when he and I fell in love.”

Sarah nodded. “The truth is always preferable.”

“If nothing else, it’s easier to remember. Besides, the less time he has to spend with her, the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

“You don’t think she…”

“No, God, no. She has no interest in Sherlock, nor he in her.”

“But you still hate seeing him with her, don’t you?”

“God, I hate it so fucking much,” John exclaimed, his self-control frayed and stressed to the breaking point. “I hate all the gossipers talking about what a handsome couple they make, speculating on if they’re dating, how they have to smile and act flirty – they’re both much too good as actors, it’s too believable. My only consolation is that when he comes home he looks just as miserable as I feel.” He reached out and grasped her hand. “Were you and Anthea this miserable? When you were out with me?”

She smiled wanly. “A little, yes. At least I had the consolation that I was with someone who was a friend, and whose company I actually enjoyed. But I’d see this look in her eyes when there’d be red carpet photos of you and I – it broke my heart. That’s why I couldn’t do it anymore. If I can’t go with her, I’ll go alone or not go at all.”

“Well, he’s back tomorrow night, then Irene is sending us someplace for the weekend to get away. Someplace private where we can be together outside the house without worrying about getting spotted. I swear, it is enough to turn you into a hermit, this constant looking over your shoulder. How have you done it for five years?”

“It’s easier for women. Women are allowed to have close, intimate friendships with other women
and it isn’t assumed to be sexual. If I’m seen out with Anthea at Whole Foods or at the salon I’m not automatically a lesbian. Men don’t have that kind of leeway, or at least not as much.” She sighed. “Is it working, at least?”

“Well, our secret agents who watch this sort of thing say that there’s no more than the usual amount of gossip about us. With the film’s trailer there’s a big upsurge in fan interest in *To a Stranger.* Predictably, some of the fans are talking about me and Sherlock. But nothing on TMZ so far. Not even Perez Hilton.”

She snorted. “If there’s anything at all, he’ll be the first to pounce.”

“We must be doing a fair job keeping everything on the down low.” John smiled at her. “But don’t feel too badly for me. Honestly, it’s worth it to have him here.”

“It’s working out, then?”

“It’s brilliant. He’s impossible, of course. He’s cranky and superior and critical and judgmental and totally intolerant of anyone’s shortcomings except mine, and I’m absolutely mad for him.”

“Well, far be it from me to judge your taste in men, John.”

He chuckled. “I’m just in it for the sex.”

If anyone had told John that he’d be so eagerly spreading his legs for another man, he’d have – well, he’d at least have offered a skeptical eyebrow-arch. He’d found men attractive before, had even had sexual contact with other men, but he’d never really imagined himself having sex with one in this way. Now, he couldn’t get enough. He might have thought that whatever alpha-male pride he possessed would throw up a protest, but in the end it didn’t matter. Fuck the alpha-male pride. He loved the feeling of Sherlock inside him too much to care.

He loved it even more when it was drowsy and cozy and intimate, as it was this particular afternoon. The energetic, pound-you-till-you-scream style was brilliant as well, but this – this made his stomach do slow rolls of bliss. Sherlock on top of him, kissing him, John wound around him as he thrust smoothly. Sherlock dropped his face into John’s damp neck. “Oh, John,” he said, his breath shaking.

John held him tighter, one hand on his head and the other on his arse. “Yes, harder,” he whispered into Sherlock’s ear. He groaned and began making longer, deeper thrusts. “Ahh God,” John choked. His own cock was trapped between their bellies where it was rubbed on each stroke. “God, you’re brilliant. Ohhhh yes…”

Sherlock slipped his arms beneath John’s shoulders, letting his full weight settle on him as he picked up the pace. John tilted his hips up a little as Sherlock hitched himself a bit higher. “John – I’m close…”

“Me too,” John choked out. Sherlock fastened his mouth on John’s neck and sucked hard, working a hand between them to stroke John’s cock. John bit back a cry as he came, spilling between their bodies. “Sherlock, god yes…”

Sherlock’s hips bucked hard, driving his cock into John’s body a few more times, then he went rigid and groaned, giving a few more shallow thrusts as he came into John. He went limp and sagged into his arms. John kissed him deeply, both of them breathing hard. “I’ve never had sex like I have with you,” Sherlock murmured. “I don’t know why it’s so different.”

“You love me, that’s why,” John said, kissing his nose and his closed eyelids.
“Is that it?” Sherlock sounded a bit dazed.

John chuckled, cradling him in his arms. “So they say.” They lay there for a few moments, Sherlock still buried in John’s body, until finally he had to roll away to his back. John got up, leaving a soft kiss on Sherlock’s chest and letting his hand trail away down his arm. “You want some water?”

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, vaguely assenting.

John went into the bathroom to clean up, then trotted nude down the stairs to the kitchen. This had been a very impromptu rendezvous. They’d both had full schedules today, but a meeting John had scheduled at two o’clock had been moved so he’d found himself with two free hours. He’d texted Sherlock. *Unexpected downtime. Meet me at home?*

The answer had come very quickly. *Be there as soon as I can.*

John had arrived first, undressed and got into bed to wait. To his embarrassment, he’d fallen asleep. He’d woken to Sherlock climbing right in on top of him, wasting no time, and they’d gone at it without so much as a hello.

He went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. As he headed back to the stairs, his attention was caught by a plain wrapped flat parcel lying on the counter with a note. Frowning, he picked up the note. *Stopped by to drop these off. Didn’t want to interrupt. Sounded like a good time was being had by all. –Irene* Shaking his head, John took the parcel with him. He knew what it was.

He had to hesitate by the side of the bed before climbing back in. Sherlock was elegantly sprawled out, the sheets barely covering him, eyes closed. He was so damned beautiful. John could lose minutes just looking at him, if such a thing were to be allowed by the object of his admiration. *I could look at him for the rest of my life.*

John cleared that thought away and got back in bed. Sherlock stirred with a grumble, immediately burrowing into John’s arms like a sleepy child. John kissed the top of his head. “This is a lark,” John said. “Like an afternoon date with my boyfriend. Feels like we’re being naughty. As though we’re cheating on each other, with each other. Last-minute secret meetings and such.”

Sherlock chuckled. “Yes, I’ll be tormented with guilt that I’m cheating on Irene. It’ll keep me up nights, I dare say.”

John sat there for a moment, enjoying the warm weight of Sherlock in his arms, one hand combing through his hair. “You know what day it is?”

“Friday.”

“Today it’s one month since you surprised me in the kitchen.”

“Hmm. Am I in some sort of trouble for not marking the occasion through the purchase of a random and inexplicable gift of flowers or chocolates?”

“No. I just thought – oh, I don’t know what I thought. It’s an anniversary of sorts.”

“And tomorrow it’ll be one month and one day and the day after that it’ll be one month and two days and so forth. John, as far as I’m concerned, every day with you is worth commemoration.”

John grinned. “Aw, Sherlock. Is that sentiment I detect in your voice?”

“Nothing of the kind. I’m merely pointing out that the arbitrary designation of the passage of any
interval of time as more or less meaningful than any other interval makes no inherent sense.”

“You need to watch yourself. You’ll turn into a romantic.”

“Perish the thought. What’s that, then?” Sherlock had seen the parcel.

“Irene was here while we were otherwise occupied. She said she’d drop by the Entertainment Weekly as soon as she had it. It won’t be on newsstands until tomorrow.”

Sherlock pulled away and sat up straighter. “Well, let’s see it.” He took the water bottle from John and drank half of it down in one gulp

John opened the parcel and pulled out three copies of the magazine. All he could do for a moment was stare at the cover photo. “Oh. Oh – my.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows had shot up. “My, indeed. Don’t we look dishy?”

‘Dishy’ was one word for it. The photographer had put them both in black shirts and shot against a black background, so they appeared to float. They were back to back, turned so that John was three-quarters to the camera and Sherlock was three-quarters away. Sherlock was looking back over his near shoulder, John down and toward Sherlock. They both had thoughtful, serious expressions on and the black-and-white image made them both look like – well, like movie stars. Whoever had done the image processing had restored the color in just their eyes. Sherlock’s alien verdigris and John’s deep blue peered out from under their lids. It was a stunning photograph. The cover had been kept mostly free of text except above the masthead and the title of their article in the lower right. “Men on a Mission: Sherlock Holmes and John Watson shoot for career rejuvenation and a leap forward for gay cinema in ‘To a Stranger.’”

“I suppose we’d better read it, although I dread finding out how badly I was misquoted or taken out of context this time.” John handed Sherlock another copy and they both opened to the article. It was accompanied by another two-shot and several individual shots, all black and white but with different wardrobe. John was rather distracted by the one of Sherlock in a very well-tailored white button-down.

The interview and photoshoot, which they’d done a few weeks ago, had gone surprisingly smoothly. The interviewer had pointedly not asked them about any rumors of their personal involvement, just more generic ones about their friendship. As John read the article, hope sprung in his chest as no hideous misrepresentations jumped out at him. They had talked about the career slumps each had been experiencing, how they’d come to the project, and about John’s “unconventional” casting, as this material was not in his normal wheelhouse. Sherlock had admitted to having had doubts about his co-star but quickly went on to praise John’s performance. They talked about the close friendship they’d developed, and in a calculated move that they’d decided upon with Irene, had acknowledged that Sherlock was staying at John’s house while he sold his condo and researched real estate. Having this fact out in the open would ease their paranoia a tad and provide a touch of an alibi, because surely they wouldn’t admit to living together if they actually were hiding a relationship. They talked about their filming experience, about the uniqueness of Molly Hooper’s script, the inevitable Brokeback comparisons, and Ang’s direction. The interview ended with each of them saying what they hoped audiences would take away from the film. This question had not, in fact, been asked during their sit-down but had been emailed to each of them later for their answer. John said he hoped they’d take away the universality of human stories, and no longer feel the need to label something a “gay” story. Sherlock’s answer was “I hope people will realize just how egregiously they’ve underestimated John Watson as an actor.”

John blinked, that response surprising the hell out of him. He looked over at Sherlock, who glanced
at him and went back to reading – it looked like he was on his second time through. “I knew you’d make the appropriate final statement about the film’s importance so I decided to risk going for a personal hope.”

You mad wanker, John thought. “You did rather show your hand a bit.”

Sherlock sighed. “As a professional, I’m allowed to express admiration for the skills of my colleagues. If I’d said something about how I hoped people would see what a brilliant kisser you are, that might be suspect.”

“Am I a brilliant kisser?” John said, grinning.

“You may continue to demonstrate it at your convenience,” Sherlock said, not taking his eyes off the pages, a half-smile on his face.

John slumped back among the pillows and waited for Sherlock to finish his re-read. He did, set the magazine aside, and returned to John’s embrace. “There is something we ought to talk about,” John said.

“Must we? I’m quite comfortable and contented at the moment.” Sherlock’s hand was making tiny stroking motions across John’s stomach, as if he were petting him. It was soothing.

“I think we must.”

“All right.”

“Sherlock – once we come out, there’ll be no going back. We ought – I mean, we should be sure – oh, bugger, I don’t know how to say this that it won’t sound awful.”

“Then allow me. We should be sure that we’re serious about each other. If we go public and break up a week later, we’ll never be allowed to forget it.”

“Yes. I’d rather not become the Anne Heche of the new millennium, if that isn’t too insensitive a thing to say,” John sighed. “How is it possible that we haven’t had this discussion? How did we skip that bit and barrel straight on into the coming-out strategies?”

“Because at the time we were in Sussex, rather drunk on each other and still high on the adrenaline of your appearance in my dressing room. It’s not easy for me to admit this, as you will appreciate, but I wasn’t operating at my most rational at the time and I reckon you weren’t, either.”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Some time has passed. We’ve been living together for a month. We’ve seen each other at our unglamorous worst and faced many of the difficulties we knew we’d face. It’s normal that we ought to start thinking rationally again.”

John pressed his lips to Sherlock’s forehead. “All true.”

Sherlock turned a bit and propped up on his elbow so he could look John in the face. “You need only ask yourself the question you’re asking me, John. Have no doubts about my intentions. Have you ever known me to be less than decisive, or clear about my own mind?”

“No, never.”

“I love you. I have never loved another and I never expect to. If you require me to make a
declaration of permanence then I’ll make one, but since you are already aware that I would ring up
every journalist in town and inform them of our relationship right this moment, you can be under no
illusions about my attitude towards our future together. I can only surmise that it is your own
commitment that you doubt. So if either of us should be questioning his partner’s intentions, it is me.”

John looked into Sherlock’s eyes and the words were out before he could stop them. “Marry me.”

Sherlock snorted. “No. Out of the question.”

John was a bit knocked off center by that. “That isn’t the answer I was expecting.”

“No doubt. But it is the correct one. It is far too soon to be considering formalizing, John. I
appreciate what you’re trying to communicate to me, but you’re being rather clumsy about it, aren’t
you?”

John sighed, miserably. “Naturally. How else would I be?”

“Don’t take on so.” Sherlock sat up against the headboard and pulled John into his arms. John went,
curling up in an embarrassed little ball and hiding his face against Sherlock’s bare chest. “I have
considered the step you just suggested. I’m not implying that such a thing is forever off the table.
Quite the opposite. At some point in the future, there is no question that nothing would make me
happier than to be your husband, and you mine. But I won’t consider such a step while we must
hide. I won’t bind myself to you until I can do so in full view of the world. You’ve asked me to love
you in secret, and I am doing it. Don’t ask me to do more.”

“Am I ruining us?” John asked. “Is this too much?”

He felt Sherlock’s lips in his hair. “No. We can take anything for a few short months. They’ll be
busy months, and the Oscars will have been and gone before we know it. That is putting aside the
undeniable fact that loathsome as it is, this choice is the correct one. In this I find myself on the
wrong side of rationality for the first time – well, the first time in my life, John. I hope you can
consider that an achievement. This decision we’ve made is based on reality, careful thought and
prudence. If it were up to me, I’d be making a proper mess of things. It is fortunate that I have you to
temper my innate stubbornness. Mycroft always said that it would be my undoing.” He tightened his
arms around John. “I hope, at the very least, we’ve settled this question of whether or not our
commitment to each other warrants going public in the first place.”

John chuckled, wrapped not just in Sherlock’s embrace but in the cocoon of words his lover had just
spun around him, words that someone else might consider cold and detached, but which contained
some of the tenderest sentiments anyone had ever directed at John. “I think we have. Although I
never really doubted it. I just thought it needed saying.”

“What to Watch

Thursday, 10 pm EST “The Mentalist”

The conclusion of the thrilling three-episode arc featuring John Watson as cryptic
extortionist The Blogger culminates tonight as Patrick Jane and the team attempt to
rescue Agent Cho, taken captive by The Blogger last week. Watson’s unexpectedly
chilling dramatic chops have injected high tension into the series’ early fall offerings,
calming fears of the future of the show’s storylines after the demise of perpetual Jane nemesis Red John in last season’s finale.

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**SEEN AROUND TOWN**

Sherlock Holmes and his manager/publicist Irene Adler, making an appearance at a birthday party for Ben Whishaw, with whom Holmes has appeared on stage twice. Talk is swirling about Holmes and Adler, who also accompanied Holmes to last week’s L.A. premiere of Almodovar’s “The Skin I Live In.” Holmes is a notorious loner, attending social functions alone when he attends them at all. The status of their relationship is unclear, although speculation is that Holmes met Adler through John Watson, his co-star in the upcoming drama “To a Stranger,” and who shares Adler as a manager/publicist.

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**OSCAR BUZZ**

The fall film season has got Academy Awards predictions swinging into high gear. The release of Oliver Stone’s “For Which They Stand” to strong critical praise and excellent box-office strengthened that film’s status as a major contender for a boatload of awards, including a likely one for the film’s star, James Moriarty. Several major contenders are yet to be released, including “The Ides of March,” the latest offering from the powerhouse team of George Clooney and Grant Heslov. The real question mark in this field is the December release of gay drama “To a Stranger,” starring the non-obvious combination of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Amid vague rumblings about director Ang Lee revisiting the “Brokeback Mountain” well a bit too soon and both his lead actors looking for a comeback, early chatter about this film is that it’s phenomenal and that Watson, especially, is a revelation. Time will tell, as the film isn’t to hit theaters until December 2.

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**BLIND ITEMS**

This C+ supporting actress, soon to bump up a few grades based on recent films in the can, used to date this A- leading man, although our man’s star has been on the decline of late. Rumors dogged the pair that she was his beard. Turns out that he was hers. Our girl has been in a long-term relationship with another woman, who has just had a baby. Her recent breakup with her beard was given the usual explanations, but the real reason was that she just couldn’t take the secrecy any more. Her erstwhile fake paramour was fine with this, in no small part because he’d fallen madly in love with his male co-star while shooting a film, and they’re now co-habiting!

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**BACHELOR WATCH**

Ever since his break-up with Reese Witherspoon, it seems Jake Gyllenhaal would rather not be tied down. Perhaps it was the sight of his ex meeting and marrying a new man at a head-spinningly fast pace that put him off, but except for last winter’s puzzling and ill-fated fling with Taylor Swift (what was he thinking?), Gyllenhaal has remained tantalizingly available. Meanwhile, date movie mainstay John Watson, despite having a
reputation for being charming and decent, has never been married or had a relationship lasting longer than a year. His most recent girlfriend, actress Sarah Sawyer, dumped him last spring over those pesky “wanting different things” and he’s not been seen out with anyone but his sister and personal assistant, Harriet. In fact, lately the only person we see him with is his new BFF and temporary housemate Sherlock Holmes, who plays his lover in the upcoming “To a Stranger.” Holmes is busy himself with a new girlfriend, so we hear, so perhaps Watson may need some consoling while he sits at home alone without his partner in bromance.

Line forms to the left, ladies. Or gents, depending on if you believe what we hear about either of today’s bachelors – or both of them!

Irene finally found Sherlock in the alley behind the restaurant, ignominiously crouched between two dumpsters. He was squatting with his back against the brick wall, his head down and his hands dangling between his knees. For a moment, she was struck dumb at the contrast between his typical upright-and-proud bearing and the broken-looking sight before her.

They were at a premiere party for The Three Musketeers. It was their third official “date” after the Almodovar premiere (at which they’d just walked the carpet and then left) and Ben Whishaw’s birthday party (at which they’d made a token appearance). Sherlock himself had suggested that they attend this party after the premiere. Matt MacFadyen was a friend that Sherlock actually cared to see, so they’d come.

The red carpet had been brutal, more so than usual. The reporters were digging in to their relationship, asking if they were dating, asking if they were engaged, for fuck’s sake. She’d come around to Sherlock and John’s idea that they keep it casual, so that later Sherlock could claim that he’d brought her to these events merely for the company because he could not bring John. But it required them to appear at least to enjoy each other’s society, so she’d smiled and laughed and tooled her body language to indicate friendship, if not undying love.

The truth was that she could hardly understand how John actually did love the man. He was a caution, no mistake. Pretentious, impatient and superior. He was less so with her, because (according to him) he respected her intellect. If this was his better side, it was no wonder that there were at least a dozen actors in this town who categorically refused to work with him.

But love him John did. From what she could see, the sentiment was returned. And she was fond of John, very fond, and wanted him to have what he wanted. What he wanted was Sherlock, but he wanted him on his own timetable and without deep-sixing his career or this film. That was where she came in. Before meeting with them, she’d assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that Sherlock was the one urging them to stay closeted. The fact that it was John had surprised her, but it shouldn’t have done. John was careful by nature.

“Sherlock?”

He didn’t look up, but his head turned fractionally toward her. “I’d rather be alone just now, thanks.”

“But – why are you out in the alley, all by yourself? Matt was looking for you, he said he hadn’t seen you in awhile and was eager to catch up.”

“Catch up.” Sherlock snorted. “I’m sure he is. I’ve not seen him in a few years. I’d like to talk to him. I’d like to hear about his kids. He has two, you know, and a stepson. I thought we could exchange Russell horror stories. We were at RADA together, you know. Overlapped one year. I saw him across the party and thought to myself, there’s so much I’d like to tell him.” He pushed himself
to his feet; Irene winced at what the brick was doing to the back of his suit. He banged his head back against the wall, grimacing. “And I can’t tell him any of it, Irene! Oh, I can tell him about the film, I can tell him about the play, I can tell him about selling my condo and hating Moriarty but I can’t tell him about the most important thing in my life, and nothing else seems worth telling without that.” He shook his head. “I hate this beyond all reckoning. Escorting you up that red carpet is like walking a gauntlet. John is the only thing I’ve ever had that I wanted to be proud of, and I can’t.” To her horror, Sherlock’s voice caught on the last word. He put his hand over his eyes and she saw him swallow down a sob.

Irene stepped closer. “Sherlock – I had no idea.”

“Good. I am a professional actor, as you may have heard.”

“Does John know how much this is hurting you?”

“No,” he said, looking at her for the first time, his eyes blazing. “And he won’t hear it from you, either. He can’t know.”

“He wouldn’t want you to be so – tortured.”

“I know, which is why I’ve gone to some lengths to make sure he doesn’t know. This is for him, Irene. It’s all for him. He needs this film more than I do. It could reinvent him, and I want for that to happen more than I don’t want to hide. No one has ever deserved reinvention more than he does. I actually pity the rest of this bloody business because they don’t know what they have in him. Well, they shall, and I’ll not be the one to ruin it with sensationalism.”

“But – if tomorrow he told you that he’d changed his mind, that he wanted you to go public right away, would you? Even if you knew it wasn’t what was best for him?”

Sherlock thumped a fist on the wall. “Yes, because I am a bloody selfish bastard. But he’s not said that, and he won’t.” He covered his eyes again, and Irene watched, helpless, as he tried to control his emotions.

She sidled over to him and hesitantly grasped his hand. He gripped it back at once. “I feel so badly for you both,” she said. “I admit I had my doubts about you, Sherlock. But all I can say is that I hope John knows how lucky he is to have someone who loves him as much as you do.”

He looked at her out of the corner of his eyes. “I am the lucky one in this equation, Irene. I don’t think I’ll ever know how I came to earn his love, but I’m doing what I can to deserve it.”

John Watson was the jealous type.

This was a secret that he guarded. It was one of the reasons he’d intentionally kept his dating life simple. He valued his self-possession, and he didn’t want his jealousy to sabotage an otherwise meaningful relationship. His love for Sherlock had won out over his fear of his own nature, and he didn’t think he’d ever have anything to question about Sherlock’s fidelity. He’d thought he was safe.

He’d been wrong.

He was in the master suite, on the couch in the telly corner, staring at E! News Daily with a scowl on his face. They were showing footage from the Three Musketeers red carpet. Currently in the spotlight, flashbulbs going off in his face, was Sherlock. His Sherlock. With Irene on his arm.

John’s inner beast scented the air and growled.
They both looked stunning. They looked like a matched set. Irene was tall, slender and aristocratic, much like Sherlock himself. They had almost the same color hair. They looked comfortable with each other. John knew it was all an act, but that distinction was, apparently, lost on John’s reptile brain. It didn’t care that it wasn’t real. It didn’t care that Sherlock would be coming home to him and Irene would go home to her own husband. It only cared that it was seeing John’s own mate with another. Being touched by another. Being smiled at and photographed with and talked to about another.

_“She’s in my spot.”_

Someday, he would claim that spot. He would tell this whole business to go fuck itself if it didn’t like it and he would be back where he belonged, at Sherlock’s side, before God and everybody.

He glanced at the time. Sherlock would be home soon. This wasn’t live, it had been taped. He’d said that he and Irene would be going to the party, at least for a short time. He wanted to say hello to Matt MacFadyen, who was a friend from RADA. He’d probably attract some attention, as the article in _EW_ had been generating more and more press inquiries, and the people who he’d know at the party would want to talk to him. John racked his brain for who else was in this bloody film that might keep Sherlock there. He was pretty sure Sherlock didn’t know the director. Orlando hated Sherlock with notorious vitriol. Something about a parking ticket and a misunderstanding with the security guards on the Warner Bros. lot.

It was useless to speculate. Sherlock and Irene were off the screen by now, which just made it worse. Were they off seeing the film? Were they at the party right this second? Were people making sideways innuendoes at them? Was she holding his hand? Was he laughing at something she’d said?

Helpless, John just sat there and stewed. _E! News Daily_ was over. _Chelsea Lately_ was on. He didn’t even bother to change it. “The Soup” came on after Chelsea. At least this might provide a diversion.

It was half over when he heard the garage door open and shut again, then Sherlock enter through the kitchen. “John?”

He didn’t answer.

He heard Sherlock checking the den and the porch, then his footsteps coming up the stairs. He appeared in the bedroom, his tie undone already. “Oh, there you are. Didn’t you hear me call?”

“I heard.”

Sherlock sat down next to him, his hand falling to John’s knee. John could smell Irene’s perfume on him.

The inner beast was pacing now, scratching at the bars of its cage. “I’m later than I thought, I know. I got to chatting with Matt. He has some quite amusing stories about Ian McShane. Had a not-unpleasant chat with that Waltz fellow. Nice chap. Decidedly not stupid or annoying, which is a nice change of pace. I did think the Academy got it right with him, for once.”

All John heard was “blah blah blah blah” over the roar in his ears of Sherlock, smelling like Irene.

“John? Good God, are you watching something involving a Kardashian? Turn that off, I can hear your brain cells screaming in protest.” Sherlock leaned over him, grabbed the remote and stabbed the power button. He looked at John, frowning. “What’s wrong with you? You look positively thunderous.”

John met his eyes. The contact sent a bolt up his spine and he just knew he had to do something.
“You smell like her,” he said, sounding lower and rougher than he’d ever heard his own voice.

Sherlock’s pupils dilated a little. “Do I?”

“Yes,” John growled, and grabbed him. He hauled him to his feet, mauling Sherlock’s mouth with his own and tearing at his clothes. He pushed him back toward their bed, sucking, licking, biting at Sherlock’s throat. Sherlock hung onto him, going a bit boneless. No doubt he already knew what sort of headspace John was in, and what he wanted to do. John had no illusions about being able to put anything over on Sherlock Holmes.

“John,” Sherlock moaned as John tore his shirt open, buttons flying everywhere. “I’d rather smell like you.”

“Fuck yes,” John said, pushing him down on the bed. He unbuckled Sherlock’s belt and pulled his trousers and shorts right off him. He whipped off his own t-shirt and jeans, Sherlock watching, propped up on his elbows, his eyes dark with lust. “You are going to have me all over you, and inside you,” he said, naked by now. Sherlock was wearing just his shirt, hanging open and ruined, red marks all over his throat where John had left them, his hair wild. John had never been so hard.

John slicked himself fast and pushed in. “Fuck, Sherlock,” he choked out.

Sherlock wrapped his long legs around John’s waist, tilting his hips up to let John go as deep as he could. “Hard. Do it hard, I know you want to, I want you to,” he said, the words hushed and subliminal in John’s ear.

John lost all control. He went at him like a madman, the beast loose now and tearing his way through John’s brain, cutting off his restraint and reducing him to a base creature who needed this, who needed to rut and take and have and own. “Mine, mine,” he muttered as he thrust, feeling Sherlock’s cock erect between their bodies, seeing the flush rise to his upper chest. Sherlock’s head slammed back, his gorgeous neck arching, decorated with John’s markings.

“John, fuck you’re good, yes like that, more, oh God you’re making me…I’m…going to…” The next word was rendered moot by Sherlock’s cry as he stiffened and came.

John felt Sherlock’s body pulsing around his cock and he stepped up the pace. “Fuck yes, I made you come, I made you come, no one else,” he muttered, half to himself.

“No, never, no one else, come John, come for me, come inside me,” Sherlock said, grabbing John’s head in his hands and pulling him close to kiss him, biting at his lips. “Make everyone see I’m yours, fucking mark me, John…”

John’s body surged, bending Sherlock nearly half on the bed, and he poured himself into him, the world going a bit white and fuzzy as his brain went offline for a few moments. The next thing he knew he was lying on top of Sherlock, still wrapped up in his long limbs, his face pressed into Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock was caressing him, kissing his face.
He saw the last few minutes on tape-delay as if he were watching a match. He lifted his head, wide-eyed, and saw Sherlock smiling at him. “Jesus. Sherlock – I’m sorry. Are you all right?”

Sherlock frowned. “Of course I am. Why on earth are you apologizing?”

“I was – that was – I lost it a bit, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. It was tremendously arousing. I suspected you had a jealous streak but I didn’t know it would manifest itself with such lovely side benefits to me.”

“Then it was okay?”

“If it hadn’t been, do you for one moment imagine that I wouldn’t have said so?”

“Well, no.” He let himself smile a bit. “And you came with no hands. That was a first.”

“Indeed.” He peered at him. “Are you all right?”

John rolled to the side and propped up on one elbow. He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m a little embarrassed.”

“Because you don’t like to see yourself as – how shall I put it? A caveman.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“We are all cavemen, John. Some more than others. That urge to possess and claim and own is in all of us. It is harmless unless it bleeds into daily life.”

“But I don’t want to treat you like a sex object.”

“Why on earth not? One likes to be treated like a sex object sometimes, when one is actually having sex. I’ve gone at you with similar enthusiasm in the past. Did it bother you?”

“God, no. I liked it. I liked that I could make you want me like that.”

“Then stop worrying.” He sat up. “This shirt is a write-off, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Please. A shirt for a truly epic shag? Fair trade.”

They cleaned themselves up, trading off in the shower, and John poured some wine. They got into bed and watched the previous night’s “Project Runway” episode on the DVR, cuddling and exchanging quiet kisses, and John felt himself calming down. Sherlock was his, but the ownership went both ways.

John was awakened by Sherlock’s mobile going off. He grunted and turned over, casting a bleary glance at the clock. Fuck, who is calling at five a.m.? He heard Sherlock answer. “Yes? Sally, do you know what time it is? What in god’s name are you doing up?” He paused. “Yes, of course he’s here, we do share a bed, you know.” He sat up and thumbed the speaker on. “Go ahead, he can hear you.”

“Morning, lovebirds. Sorry to wake you so early.”

“It’s okay,” John said, yawning and rubbing his eyes. “What is it?”
“Some news. Troubling news from the Tubes.”

“When is there not?” Sherlock grumbled.

“Perez posted a picture of Sherlock and Irene at the premiere with the usual inane commentary, although he does compliment both of you for looking fabulous.”

“That hardly merits a pre-dawn phone call, Sally,” Sherlock said.

“I wish that were all. He goes on to say, and I’m quoting here, ‘Nice try, Sherlock, but we all know you’re a cold fish. Or are you? I’ve got a very reliable source who informs me that your days as an aloof bachelor are over. But your new honey is not the super-chic babe on your arm. It’s the cuddlier (and shorter) John Watson. My source says that you two couldn’t have been more obviously crazy about each other while playing lovers onscreen, and that you’ve moved to LA to be with him, even given up your own house to shack up. Thank God, because I might finally have a shot at you, you gorgeous thing.’”

They were both silent for a moment. “Is that all?” Sherlock said, his tone frosty.

“Isn’t that enough? It’s the first reporting of rumors about you two on a major Internet gossip outlet. All they needed was for one person to go first. Now it’ll be open season.”

“They’ve got nothing concrete to report,” John said. “We’ve been very careful.”

“Having nothing concrete is no barrier to gossip, John, and you know it.” Sally sighed. “I’d better to set up some new alerts, check the other sites.”

“All right. Keep us posted.” Sherlock hung up.

They both fell back into the bedding. “It starts,” John said. Sherlock said nothing. John looked over at him. Sherlock was staring at the ceiling, eyes narrowed and lips slightly pursed. “You’re figuring out who talked, aren’t you?”

“Trying to.”

“It doesn’t matter. Stop it.”

He sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“But we have a more serious matter to hash out.”

Sherlock looked at him, frowning. “What?”

“How am I going to keep you, now that you know Perez is up for it?”

For a fraction of a second a look of absolute befuddlement crossed Sherlock’s face, then it creased into a grin and he laughed, a tad maniacally. “Yes, that is a bit of a worry. Lord knows it’s always been my fantasy.” He touched John’s chin with one finger. “So, John. What are you going to do to keep me happy?”

John grinned back and rolled over him. “Whatever you want.”

Chapter End Notes
The Triumphant Return of MetaNotes!

Hoo boy, brace yourself. Lots of MetaNotes.

1. I am probably fudging reality by involving studio executives from Universal in this situation. It is true that Focus Features is a division of Universal Studios, but Focus is itself a studio. Unless Universal put up some money towards the filming of “To a Stranger” it isn’t too likely that they’d involve themselves in this situation. My narrative problem was that I did not want to make Jim Schamus the bad guy here (by all accounts he is not in reality) and there’s nobody higher than him at Focus, he’s the CEO. So if I wanted higher-ups I had to invent some who worked for the next level up. Forgive the fudging. If anybody cares at all or is confused about the difference between studios and production companies leave a comment and I’ll attempt an explanation.

2. Reminder: ADR = additional dialogue recording, also known as “looping.” The process in post-production by which an actor re-recorders his dialogue to be overlaid when the original sound recording made during filming is unusable. Most actors hate doing this (it requires them to reproduce a vocal performance without actually acting in the scene) but it’s almost always necessary for at least some shots, especially those filmed outdoors.

3. Irene makes reference to back-end points. These are percentages of the film’s net profit that are allocated to the actors. They’re becoming more and more common in film contracts. Often an actor will accept a lower salary up front if he is guaranteed back-end points, say five percent of profit. There’s an increasing trend for actors to forego up-front payment entirely and be paid solely in back-end points, if they’re sure enough of the film’s success. They’re also a safer bet on a low-budget film. “To a Stranger” would have been a fairly economical film to make given the lack of special effects and Canadian shoot. It was probably made for well under $20 million despite being shot entirely on location (Brokeback Mountain, as a point of comparison, which was also filmed entirely on location in Canada, cost $14 million). Incidentally, most people think that to make a profit, a film must make back its budget. Not true. To make a profit, a film must make back double its budget, as 50% of a film’s revenue goes to the theaters that show it.

4. After some deliberation I decided to leave real Hollywood as it is, just adding in my fictional actors and their projects. So the movies mentioned really are opening in October and are as they are described, “The Mentalist” is an actual TV show, etcetera. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Matthew MacFadyen, one of the stars of “The Three Musketeers,” went to RADA (as did Sherlock, if you’ll recall) and is close to Sherlock’s age, making him an excellent candidate to be a friend.

5. If you’re looking for a good time, I do NOT recommend scouring Wikipedia for someone who was a) born in the second week in October, b) works in the film industry and c) is someone Sherlock is likely to have worked with. Ben Whishaw was a fortunate discovery. My second choice was Sacha Baron Cohen.

6. Fun trivia fact: Warner Bros. is not an abbreviation for Warner Brothers. The legal name of the studio is Warner Bros. so if you see the word “brothers” written out, that is stylistically incorrect. It looks weird sometimes, but that’s how the company is registered.

7. Things I never thought I’d be doing for a fic: researching the E! television network’s
late-night schedule of programming.
“What should I wear? How formal is this event?”

Sherlock was standing in the closet in his dressing gown, surveying the sartorial options. John was shaving. Irene was lounging on the couch in the master suite. The concept of “boundaries” had more or less broken down among the three of them over the past two months.

“I’m wearing jeans,” John said. “Is that okay, Irene?”

“I’d say so,” she called in from the bedroom.

Sherlock walked into the bathroom, holding a white button-down and a tailored jacket. “What if I wore these, with jeans?”

“Wear the dark ones, with the narrow leg. Your arse looks amazing in those.”

“I didn’t think the point of this was to dress so as to arouse you, John.”

“No. Just a perk. And don’t wear the white button-down, it’ll glow under the lights. Wear something dark, like that wine-colored one. But with the charcoal gray jacket.”

Sherlock nodded. “Your fashion sense is improving.”

“You must be rubbing off on me.” John met Sherlock’s eyes and they both giggled.

“Stop right there, I’m filling in enough innuendo in my head, no need to say it out loud,” Irene said.

John walked out into the bedroom. “I don’t know why, but I’m nervous,” he said.

“We are seeing the product of our labors for the first time,” Sherlock said. “A little anxiety is natural.”

“With all the drama going on around it, it’s easy to forget there’s still an actual film to worry about.”

“It’s one week to the LA premiere,” Irene said, “and two weeks to nationwide release. We can make it. It’s the home stretch.”

John sighed. “It’ll be a relief, but then we just have to face more waiting. And the talk is only going to get worse once they actually see us onscreen together, kissing and having sex and what have you.” He pulled a v-neck jumper over his t-shirt, running a hand through his hair. “It’ll be nice to see Molly again tonight. And Ang, as well. Haven’t seen either of them since we wrapped.”

Sherlock emerged looking perfect, as usual. “They both know, correct?”

Irene nodded. “Everyone associated with the production got a memo.”

John stared at her. “There was a memo? About us?”

“John, they can’t respect your privacy or keep your secrets if they are caught off-guard by a question. That is how people are startled into blurting something out. I’m told that Ang was very supportive,
which was a relief.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Sherlock said.

“Because if two straight actors play lovers onscreen, then fall in love and ‘turn gay,’” she said, making air quotes, “it’s open season on any actor playing a gay role. It’ll make them even more susceptible to rumor than they already were. We may see a sudden drop in straight actors willing to play gay roles, which is a real problem for directors. For years the business has been saying that playing gay didn’t make you gay. Well, for you two, it did.”

“Leaving aside the half dozen holes I could poke in that argument, I fail to see how their internalized homophobia is our fault,” Sherlock snapped, but John was shaken. That was an angle he hadn’t considered.

“But – playing gay didn’t make me gay,” he said. “I don’t even know that I am gay! And it wasn’t playing that role that made me fall for Sherlock. It was – well, I don’t know what it was, exactly, but it wouldn’t have mattered if we were playing lovers or police partners or archrivals!”

“You really think most people are going to make that distinction?” Irene said. “To most of the world, it’s a simple cause-and-effect. You weren’t gay, you played gay, now you are gay. QED.”

“And here I’ve been worrying about backlash from the Fox News crowd,” John said.

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll get plenty of that. But I think we’re all going to be unpleasantly surprised from the internal Hollywood backlash. There’s a cone of silence around these things, and you guys coming out is going to be a big old crack in it. That’s going to be threatening to a lot of people.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Sherlock said. “This is supposed to be a warm-up event, is it not? A nice low-stress screening and question session with a private audience who are likely to fawn over us?”

“Well, that is the idea,” Irene said. “I’m not sure we can count on anything being low-stress at this point.”

It had been a very long month.

Perez Hilton’s “revelation” about John and Sherlock’s relationship had been met with skepticism in some quarters and eager salivation in others. As Irene always said, the rule online was “pics or it didn’t happen,” so the collective Internet hive mind went to work. So far, the most incriminating thing was the photo of Sherlock leaving the airport with Harry, which was still easily explained by Sherlock staying at John’s house, but that arrangement was also being questioned. The not-gay camp insisted that Sherlock was, indeed, selling his condo, as a simple real estate search verified, and pointed out that they had freely admitted that they were housemates in the EW article. The gay camp wondered why Sherlock was staying so long with John instead of renting a place, and why it was taking him so long to find a new one.

The level of paparazzi attention to their activities had increased by at least an order of magnitude. Neither of them had ever been particular targets given that they’d always led fairly dull lives without scandal, nubile young starlets or drunken antics. Unfortunately, this was no longer the case. The paps had set up camp at the gated entrance to John’s neighborhood. The tinted windows protected them to a degree, but it wasn’t long before their dogged pursuers figured out which cars were theirs. It wasn’t as if they could hide their license plates.

Happily, their schedules had been very light on public appearances thanks to Irene’s strategizing, so
the number of impertinent questions shouted at them during red carpets or press events was minimal. John had attended the opening of an exhibit at the Getty two weeks after Perez broke the story and had, as was his habit, stopped to sign some autographs for fans. A disproportionate number of them wanted him to sign prints of the To a Stranger publicity stills, and he was barraged with shouted questions from reporters and photographers. John, are you gay? Are you and Sherlock living together? Did you hook up during the film? Is this a publicity stunt? He’d been particularly confused by that last one. If it were a publicity stunt, they could hardly expect that he’d admit it.

John was feeling a bit more relaxed than he had been, though. He and Sherlock had just returned from holiday. Sensing their frustration and cabin fever, Irene had sent them to an extremely private, exclusive resort near Mt. Shasta in northern California for a week. John had been afraid to ask how much the place cost. The resort, which catered to the wealthy and those who wanted privacy, like them, consisted of a group of isolated luxury lodges. They’d been pampered and waited on and treated like kings, when they were so inclined, but for the most part they’d been left alone. They’d hiked in the mountains, stretched out on blankets and stargazed on clear nights, and soaked themselves in the hot tub for hours on end. They’d honest-to-God made love in front of a roaring fire. It had been heaven. John had come home feeling refreshed, but Sherlock seemed, if anything, even tenser than before. He’d appeared to enjoy himself during their time away, but as they prepared to return home he’d grown quiet and snappish. John pretended he didn’t notice.

The screening was being held at the Harmony Gold Theater on Sunset Boulevard. It was a novel sensation to actually ride in the same car as Sherlock, after months of strictly enforced public separation. They would be all but joined at the hip for the next few weeks for the press events. John wasn’t sure he wouldn’t rather do things separately. Standing and walking with Sherlock, posing for photos – he’d have to work hard to suppress what by now had become natural: touching him casually, holding his hand, kissing him when the urge struck.

Irene parked in the gated lot reserved for the theater’s special guests, and they made their way inside where they were shown to a green room. Molly and Ang were there; they exchanged hugs and handshakes. Molly looked from one to the other, her eyes shining. “It’s really true, then?” she said, beaming.

John glanced at Sherlock. “I’m afraid so, Molly. I’m sorry, but Sherlock’s off the market.”

She slapped at him, laughing. “Oh, don’t be silly, I’m thrilled for you.” Ang was smiling, but he did not comment. John was glad that he wasn’t upset, but the last thing he wanted was to upstage Ang’s film, so the less the matter was discussed, the better.

A woman with an earpiece and a clipboard came in. “All right, folks, the audience is taking their seats. You can sneak in when we lower the house lights. Once the screening is over, we’ll set up chairs on the stage and you’ll join the moderator there, he’ll ask a few questions to get things rolling, then we’ll open it up for questions from the audience. We set aside some tickets for film students as you requested, Mr. Holmes, and they were snapped up in an instant. Expect lots of process questions,” she said, with a wink.

“Our favorite kind, I’m sure,” Sherlock said.

John glanced at him, wondering if he were as anxious as John felt. To finally see this film, which had meant so much to both of them – well, he didn’t know how he’d feel. Watching Benjamin and Mark discover their relationship would be to remember himself and Sherlock discovering theirs. Above all, he hoped it was as good as they all thought it would be. He hoped it would be worth all the sacrifices he and Sherlock were making for it.

They entered the auditorium once the house lights were down. A quick few screens of upcoming
events for the *Variety* series were being shown. They snuck into the seats that had been roped off for them in the front row. John wondered if he could risk holding Sherlock’s hand under cover of darkness. He didn’t have much time to ponder this question before the film began.

Andrew Bird’s score was the first thing he heard. It was minimalist but evocative, a plaintive violin and a piano. A quiet guitar joined in. The opening was brief, only the studio credits and “an Ang Lee film.” No cast names, no writing credits.

Then – smash cut to the hospital waiting room. A couch, viewed straight on, the desaturation making it seem even lonelier for the single person in the shot. Mark, on the far left, seated alone, knees together, looking straight ahead.

John took a deep breath. *Here we go.*

Irene sat there as the credits rolled, Andrew Bird’s quiet voice singing the song he’d composed as the film’s theme. She heard Molly sniffling over to her right. John and Sherlock were on her left and they were practically vibrating with the effort of not holding hands.

The audience was eerily quiet, listening to the song. Nobody was talking or clapping or shifting in their seats.

The song ended, giving way to instrumental score as the credits rolled on. The applause started somewhere in the back of the auditorium and within a few seconds became a crashing, deafening roar. The audience all but leapt to their feet as the house lights came up.

She glanced to her left and caught Sherlock looking at John. The expression on his face said it all. “It’s worth it,” he whispered. John nodded.

The stagehands were quickly and efficiently moving five chairs onto the stage, one of them set a bit apart and facing the other four. That’d be for the moderator from *Variety*, film historian and analyst Malcolm Dobbs.

John, Sherlock, Ang and Molly stood up and mounted the stage. The applause intensified, peppered with shouts and whistles. Irene had been to many screenings, and it was rare to get a response like this. *Brokeback* had gotten it, she recalled, as had *Memento*.

It took five minutes for everything to die down. Irene got up and relocated to the back of the theater, feeling conspicuous sitting alone up front. She clipped her Bluetooth back into her ear and got ready, just in case.

Malcolm collected his notecards as everyone sat back down, settling in and murmuring. “Gentlemen, Ms. Hooper, congratulations. It’s a remarkable film,” he began. They all nodded their thanks as the audience applauded anew. “We are proud of it,” Ang said.

“Before we begin, I’d like to interject one personal reaction.” Malcolm hesitated. “John Watson…” he began, and that was as far as he got. The audience broke into mad applause and catcalls, and suddenly they were on their feet again. John looked around, amazed. Ang and Molly rose as well, then Sherlock, laying a hand briefly on John’s shoulder before starting to clap. John half-rose and bowed a bit awkwardly, shrugging it off and holding out “no, no, please” hands, smiling that self-deprecating, humble smile that was often thought to be a put-up job but which Irene knew to be genuine. Everyone calmed, and with that, Dobbs was off. He asked them to discuss the casting, the script, the usual elements of filmmaking. For twenty minutes they spoke in turn, all of them giving answers they’d probably rehearsed in their heads for the questions Dobbs was likely to ask.
The fun, nerve-wracking part would come next. Audience questions.

A bohemian-looking film student was first. “Mr. Holmes, this question is for you. First of all, I loved the film, and I thought you were very good in it.”

Sherlock gave him a nod. “Thank you.”

“You’re known to be a very cerebral actor with a well-defined method to your work. You seemed much looser and more in touch with your emotional side in this film. Can you comment on that?”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “I’ll try. This material was inspiring, but I must give the credit for any differences you noticed in me to my co-star. John and I worked very closely together and I believe we learned a great deal from each other. I trusted him and that’s very important when you’re performing so intimately with another actor. I was able to expand my experience of the craft and I believe my performance was the better for it.”

Irene could see John puffing up a bit with the praise. The next question was from a critic. “John, let’s not mince words. You’re known for date movies and romantic comedies, and your films of late have been lackluster. Did you intentionally seek a role that would let you break out of that mold and demonstrate what you were capable of?”

John sat up straight. “Well, I’ll say that you certainly don’t mince words.” Scattered laughter. “It’s true that I’d become associated with a certain genre of films. I’m proud of many of those films. Not so proud of others. I confess that what I really wished for was a challenge, something that would force me out of my comfort zone, but I’d given up on ever again being offered such a role, so when I got the call to read for this part, it was – well, a sort of miracle. I did and do hope that it will allow me to – how did you put it, Sherlock? Expand my experience of the craft.”

Another film student was next, a young man. “How did you prepare for the love scenes? Neither of you have done romantic scenes with another man before; how was the experience different?”

Irene wasn’t surprised, nor did John and Sherlock appear to be so. They’d all expected many iterations and variations on this question. John and Sherlock looked at each other, exchanging smirky, wink-wink expressions. All calculated, of course, to subtly convey their “hey-we’re-just-buds-but-professionals” personas. “You want to take this one?” John said.

“Please, be my guest.”

“I’ll start, then.” John cleared his throat. “It’s not all that different, actually. You’ve heard a hundred other actors tell you that shooting sex scenes isn’t sexy, and they have not lied to you. Sherlock and I, since we shot this film almost entirely in sequence, had achieved a level of trust and comfort with each other that made it fairly easy. In a way, it was easier than similar scenes with women, when I am always very conscious of their sensibilities. I’m usually terrified of offending them in some way. I wasn’t as concerned about that with Sherlock.”

“It’s a question of getting yourself into the appropriate frame of mind,” Sherlock said. “And letting go of the fear of being seen, and of being honest about how you are seen. That is the hardest task an actor faces.”

Irene nodded a little. They’d pulled that one off well.

A mousy, unassuming young woman had the next question. “As is so often the case with films about lovers, there have been some ugly rumors floating around about your involvement off-camera. Have you heard those rumors? Can you comment on why people make these assumptions?”
Sherlock shifted in his chair. Irene’s brain twigged to something in his posture. *Battle stations.*

John smiled. “Of course we’ve heard the rumors, everyone has. That’s something we always have to contend with as actors. People confuse the characters we play with who we are as people. Sherlock and I are just good friends. The problem that arises is….

“Ugly rumors?” Sherlock interrupted, leaning forward a little. “Why ugly?”

“She just meant the rumors that – ” John said, trying to redirect.

“I know what she meant, John,” Sherlock said, cutting him off with a gesture. “I’m merely curious about the wording. Ugly rumors. Hmnn. I have to wonder. If my co-star were a woman, would those same rumors have been described in this fashion? I don’t think so. They’d have been ‘naughty’ rumors, or ‘sexy’ rumors, or just plain rumors. But since my co-star is a man, this man here, suddenly these rumors are ‘ugly.’” The young woman who’d asked the question was glancing around, looking horrified. The audience was shifting in their seats. John was giving Sherlock a Look. Sherlock harrumphed and pulled himself back a little.

“Rumors of that nature are very common, I think was the salient point,” Dobbs interjected.

“Yes, of course,” Sherlock said, in a calmer tone. “John and I played lovers, so people wonder if we are lovers. Of course we aren’t. John and I are good friends, nothing more. How could we be otherwise? It’s preposterous.” He was toeing the party line, but he had a strange, distracted look in his eyes that Irene did not care for. She could see his face flushing from the back of the auditorium.

Dobbs nodded. “Getting back to your answer, John, would you – ”

“What if we weren’t?” Sherlock said, abruptly. His eyes had gone all – flashy.

Irene grit her teeth. *Oh, shit.*

“I’m sorry?” Dobbs said.

Sherlock’s fingers were laced together so hard that his knuckles were white. “What if we weren’t just friends? What would that mean, Malcolm?” A murmur ran over the audience. Ang and Molly were looking at Sherlock like he’d gone insane. John was doing his best to appear calm, but his jaw was clenching.

“Sherlock,” John began, reaching out as if to touch his arm but stopping his hand halfway there.

“No, John, I’m curious. Perhaps we ought to ask some questions of our own while we have access to so much Hollywood insight here. What if everything people were saying were true – well, except for that bit about Barbados, anyway, that’s rubbish. Let us speak in terms of the worst case scenario, shall we? What if we were together, and it were discovered? Or even acknowledged? Surely that would be the absolute worst possible situation for us. No one could imagine anything more disastrous than that. What would it mean? Would it mean my career would be over, as well as his? What about this film that we worked so hard on, and which means so much to us? Would it be doomed to failure? Would the film’s quality cease to matter? Would its merits become so insignificant that our private lives would have the power to eclipse them? Would it really be such a calamity that we must speak of it as if the very invocation of these ugly rumors is enough to make us all panic? Tell me, Malcolm. Would the hallowed pages of *Variety* really disown us and make sure we never worked in this town again for the hideous sin of loving each other?” He stopped, his voice having risen steadily throughout this speech until he was speaking more forcefully than was usual at a friendly Q&A.
The room was so silent it was as if Sherlock’s inhalations had sucked everyone else’s voices from their throats. Sherlock sat there for a moment, swallowing hard, his mouth opening and closing like a fish’s. John was frozen in place, staring at the floor, his jaw clenched so hard that his face had gone all square. Dobbs clearly had no idea what to do.

Sherlock ran a hand through his hair. He looked around and seemed to realize what he’d just done. No one in the room could possibly still think that he had been speaking hypothetically.

Irene could see at least half a dozen people trying to be subtle about going for their phones. It’d be on Twitter within thirty seconds. *Sherlock Holmes just outed himself and John Watson as a couple at a Variety screening. Film at eleven. Oh God…film.* This Q&A was streaming live on *Variety*’s website. Who needed Twitter?

“I think we ought to…” Dobbs began.

Sherlock stood up. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. He tore off his body mic, shot an agonized glance down at John, who was not looking at him, and stalked off the stage into the wings.

John turned and watched him go. Dobbs looked at Ang and Molly and seemed ready to redirect the conversation and pretend none of that had happened, but he was once again cut off when John stood up as well. “My apologies,” he said. “Will you please excuse us for a moment?”

Dobbs nodded, looking glad to have something polite to respond to. “Of course.”

John removed his own body mic and followed Sherlock offstage. The whole audience was murmuring now. Dobbs held up a hand. “All right, ladies and gentlemen. I’m sure we’ll have the chance to speak to Sherlock and John again once they return. No doubt you’ll have more questions for them.” A nervous titter of laughter. “Right now, let’s turn to this remarkable screenplay….”

Irene wasn’t listening. She had her own phone out. She sent a text message to Greg, Mike, Harry and Sally as well as her own assistant, Bruno.

*Code red, everyone. Implement Action Plan Delta.*

John walked offstage, fists clenched, clamping down on his anger. He could see Sherlock in the wings, his back turned, silhouetted by the red glow of an Exit sign. John’s stomach was rolling, he was afraid he might throw up. Panic was crowding out conscious thought with loud, insistent cries of *oh fucking arse it’s out it’s all out we are done we are out that’s it it’s all over this is it what the fuck did he just do.* He wished he understood what had just happened on that stage. He’d had to restrain himself from tackling Sherlock to the floor to shut him up, but at the same time he’d heard the emotion in Sherlock’s voice, that underlying tremble of not-okay, and he’d wanted to put his arms around him and squeeze him until he told John what the hell was going on. How had he missed it? How had he not known that Sherlock had been so close to the edge? And why had he been that close in the first place? Sherlock was control, Sherlock was rationality, Sherlock wasn’t -- *this.*

The thought occurred that he still had a few things to learn about this man he loved.

“Sherlock!” he said, pitching his voice low, just above a whisper, fearing that they’d be overheard. Sherlock didn’t move, he just stood there with his hands on his hips and his head hanging down. “You want to tell me what the hell just happened?” No response. John ran a hand over his face. “Jesus Christ. This was not the plan. We are not prepared for this, this wasn’t supposed to happen now, and…Sherlock?” John took a step closer. “God, what were you thinking? Will you turn around and talk to me? We agreed, we fucking agreed on a plan, if you were going to toss it out with the
rubbish you could have fucking warned me and…”

He stopped talking when Sherlock turned around. The look on his face made anything else John might say irrelevant. “I’m sorry, John,” he rasped. He looked – God, he looked wrecked. To anyone else he might have looked no more than slightly perturbed, but to John, who knew him so well, he might as well have been sobbing. “I’ve ruined everything. I don’t know what happened. I know you’re angry, I just…”

John grabbed Sherlock’s upper arms. “I’m not angry, I’m confused and you’re scaring me now. What in God’s name is going on? What the hell happened out there? I thought we were okay! I thought things were going so well!”

He nodded. “They were.”

“After the holiday we just had, wasn’t it good?”

“It was better than good. That just made it worse. John, we had to go to a remote wilderness and hide behind locked gates to be together. It isn’t right. We shouldn’t have to hide.”

“No, it isn’t right at all. And I don’t want to hide either, but we – we talked about this, it was only going to be for a few more months, I thought that you…” John shook his head. “What happened? What made you just pop off like that? Can’t you tell me?”

Sherlock just stared at him with hollow, lost eyes. “I can’t do this, John. I can’t do it anymore. I thought I could do it. I tried, I swear to you that I tried, but – I can’t take it.” John watched in horror as Sherlock’s eyes welled up.

“Sherlock, my God,” he whispered. “Why didn’t you tell me how much this was hurting you?”

“I didn’t want you to know. I know how much you need this, I know how much it means to you, and I…”

“Stop,” John said, giving him a quick shake. “You should have told me you were in this much pain. Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you think you had to hide it?”

“I didn’t want you to feel guilty. I didn’t want to pressure you. I made you a promise and I meant to keep it.”

“You think that means more to me than how you feel?”

“No one’s ever cared how I feel before now.”

“Goddammit, I care, Sherlock! Aren’t we a team? Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you. It’s me I don’t trust. How could I be enough?”

John frowned. “Enough for what?”

“To make all this trouble worth it!” Sherlock said, his head coming up. “I’m not like you, John. You get along with people, you can talk to anyone. People are drawn to you, they want to be your friend, your lover, your brother, your sister. I have never had that gift. I drive people away, and that was always fine with me, because people were always tiresome. I grew up knowing I’d be alone forever, just like they said.”

Anger burned in John’s heart. “Who? Who said that?”
“Everyone! My schoolmates, my teachers, my nannies, even my own mother! I was the freak, the loner, and that was fine. They didn’t want to have anything to do with me; well, I didn’t need them, either. I never thought there’d ever be anyone like you, John. You, who are kind and decent and normal, and you chose me. I don’t have any idea why or how, but you chose me and they were wrong, they were all wrong and I wanted them to know, I wanted everyone in the world to know and see that someone like you, who could have anyone, actually wanted me.” He met John’s eyes again. “You’re the only thing I’ve ever been proud of, John. Anything else I’ve accomplished was the natural result of work and effort and superiority of skill, but you – you are mine because of me, whatever it is that you see in me, and it must be something of value for you to love me. So to sit up there and deny it and hear it called ugly and know that it would be hated and denounced – I don’t know. I lost control. I don’t know how to deal with these kinds of feelings, John. I’m new at this. I just wanted to rub it everyone’s face. And now I’ve fucked it up good and proper. I’m sorry.”

John was speechless. God, how have I failed him so badly? I’ve been given this man’s heart to care for, and it is fragile and untested. I have got to take better care of him. He reached up and pulled Sherlock into his arms, wrapping him up tightly. Sherlock clutched at him; he was shaking, he was actually trembling, and John caught the merest glimpse of the guilt he was in for later. Just the glimpse nearly brought him to his knees. “I’m the one who should be sorry,” he whispered in Sherlock’s ear. “I should have seen. I should have known.”

Sherlock sniffed. “I made sure you didn’t. I am a very good actor, John.”

“You mustn’t act for me. Not ever. Promise me you won’t hide from me.”

“I promise.”

John drew back and kissed him, brushing the wet streaks from his cheeks. “Look at me.” Sherlock met his eyes. John held his face still. “There is nothing more important to me than you. Nothing. Not this film, not my whole sodding career, do you understand?” Sherlock said nothing, just looked at him with disbelieving eyes. “Don’t you fucking talk to me about something of value that I see in you, because it is you that I value, every bit of you, the shiny bits and the dodgy bits and all the bits in between. I don’t love you because of some little glimmer of worthiness that a bunch of fucking wankers convinced you that you didn’t possess. I don’t love you because you deserve it. None of us deserve it, but all of us deserve it. I love you because you are Sherlock Holmes and I am John Watson and we were waiting for each other without knowing it. You don’t have to act a certain way or be a certain person, you don’t have to earn my love, because it is yours no matter what you do and you’re just going to have to get used to it.”

Sherlock smiled, a little hesitantly. He looked like he might speak, but then he stopped and just kissed John again, one hand in his hair, pulling John close with one arm about his waist. John kissed him back and hugged him, both of them exhaling hard, as if setting down a great weight and stretching their cramped shoulders after carrying the heavy burden for longer than they ought to have done. “John,” Sherlock murmured. “I fear that you’ll never know how deeply I love you.”

“Don’t worry,” John said. “I know. And it’s a good thing I do, because you’ve just let us in for a great cracking nightmare.”

Sherlock sighed. “What are we going to do?”

John took another look in his eyes, and he knew just what they had to do. “We’re going to make it right.”

“How can we? I just confessed the whole thing, nobody will ever believe I was speaking hypothetically. Everyone in that hall has a smartphone, it’s probably already all over Twitter.”
“Sherlock. We’ll make it right.”

“I just don’t see how we can fix this.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Then believe me when I say we’re going to make this right. Are you ready to face the world again?”

Sherlock sighed. “I suppose I’d better be.”

“All right, then.” John turned and walked back out onto the stage, not letting himself hesitate. All eyes snapped right to him. The conversation on the stage ceased at once as if guillotined. He looked back over his shoulder to find that Sherlock had not followed him out. He was standing just offstage in the wings, looking at John with a questioning, hesitant expression.

John felt a wave of peace and calm wash over him, the peace of choosing a path and not looking back, and knowing with absolute confidence that it was the right path.

He held out his hand.

A murmur ran over the audience. Sherlock’s eyes widened a little. John just beckoned him out with a wiggle of his fingers.

Sherlock walked out and grasped the offered hand. John smiled up at him, not bothering to school away the affection from his eyes, and was pleased to see the smile returned. He led Sherlock back to their chairs, where they let go of each other long enough to take their seats and re-affix their microphones to their shirts. “Sorry about that,” John said. He turned and met Sherlock’s eyes; on some tacit signal, they reached out and reclaimed each other’s hand, interlacing their fingers on the arm of John’s chair. He heard a few scattered gasps from the audience, and their murmuring jacked up a notch.

Sherlock cleared his throat, looking around. “Well, what did we miss?” he said.

The audience burst into laughter, more laughter than the remark really merited. Someone began applauding, and it spread and spread until once again, they were on their feet. John felt himself blushing. They were being applauded for it. Actually applauded. He met Sherlock’s eyes and saw the same thought mirrored there. John couldn’t help himself, he broke into a wide, happy grin. And the audience cheered.

They cheered.

John glanced over at Molly, who was crying, and Ang, who was applauding and smiling, but there was concern hovering around his eyes. The audience calmed and resumed their seats.

“Well,” Dobbs said. “I’m not entirely sure how to proceed.”

“If I may, Malcolm?” John said. Dobbs nodded. “This was not the plan. I’d – we’d – like to apologize for the interruption. This evening is about this film, and the last thing we want is to upstage it. So if you’ll just allow me to take a moment first to clear a few things up, I think we ought to return to discussing the film. There’ll be plenty of time to discuss – other matters, and I’m sure we’ll be heartily sick of discussing them before too long, so let’s not linger on the subject tonight.”
Dobbs nodded. “Agreed.”

John went on, addressing the audience. “I assume that sometime in the next day or so, Sherlock and I will release some kind of statement, which doubtless our publicist has already written and is hurriedly revising as we speak. It’ll be moot by then, of course. I don’t think I want to know how many of you have already Tweeted about this.” Nervous chuckles. “Even if you haven’t, this Q&A is being streamed live over the Internet. As I said, this was not our plan. We had intended to wait until well after the film’s release. The necessity of doing so – well, I don’t need to explain it to anyone here. Our careers and the release of this film were a concern. But the cost…” He broke off and looked at Sherlock. “Sometimes the emotional costs of secrecy are too high.” John sighed, squeezing Sherlock’s fingers. “The one thing I think we ought to make clear tonight is that we were not together when we made the film.” Sherlock nodded. “We met at my screen test. We were practically strangers when the shoot began, which was by design, and I must say we didn’t get on so well at first. We soon became close friends, but it did not become anything more until months later. I think that’s important to establish. That’s all I have to say right now. Sherlock? Anything to add?”

He thought for a moment. “Just that it was always our intention to acknowledge our relationship publicly. The fact that we need hide at all for fear of disrupting this film’s release, or that we should fear for our careers – which we both still do, of course – is unacceptable.” Enthusiastic applause. “It is our fervent hope that whatever media attention this draws – and really, it doesn’t merit the sort or the quantity that it will probably receive – will not overshadow the release of this film, which deserves nothing but fair evaluation on its considerable merits.” More applause.

Dobbs nodded. “Thank you, gentlemen. Well said. Now, shall we return to the topic at hand?”

Irene met them in the green room. John had been expecting shrieks of fury, but instead he and Sherlock were greeted with a huge hug that enveloped both of them. Surprised, he hugged her back. “Irene, I’m surprised at you. What’s next? Will I find you reading one of those Oprah books?”

“God forbid. What did you think, John? That I loved helping you hide? That I thought it was terrific that you had to be secretive? That it gave me great satisfaction to restrict your movements and pretend to date Sherlock and watch you both pine for each other even while you were living under the same roof? What sort of ogre do you think I am?”

“A publicist who wants her clients to have careers after this.”

She flapped a hand. “I am a publicist, I am a kick-ass publicist, in fact I am such a badass that your careers will not only fail to wither and die but you will, in fact, skyrocket to new heights of stardom. You watch. I’ve been planning this for months.”

“You planned for an accidental revelation?” Sherlock said.

“I planned for every conceivable contingency, including one in which one of you lost it and spilled the beans yourself, which is exactly what happened. Incidentally, my personal bookkeeping had the odds of your being able to hold out until after the Oscars at less than ten percent. I did think you’d make it until after the film’s release, though.”

“What now? Do we go to the reception?”

“Absolutely. You have nothing to hide, not anymore. This is a friendly group of people, you’ve quite unintentionally chosen the ideal venue for your little coming-out party. Enjoy the calm before the storm, it won’t last long.”
“How bad is it already?” John said, peering at her Blackberry, in her hand as always.

“Well – the first tweet that went out from this audience has already been retweeted ten thousand times.”

John blanched. “Bloody hell.”

“There is a post up about you at every major gossip outlet.” The phone trilled. “Oh – you just made HuffPo.”


Irene smiled. “Let me show you something. This might cheer you up.” She reached into her bag for her iPad. A few taps and she queued up a video. “Harry turned this up a few minutes ago. This was shot on a cell phone at a gay club up in San Francisco about a half hour ago. The club manager stopped the music and got onstage and showed everyone the clip of the Q&A. Here, watch.”

They crowded close to her iPad, Sherlock leaning over John, his hand resting on the back of John’s neck. They watched the video. When it got to the bit where they joined hands at their seats, the whole club went nuclear. Whoever was shooting the jittery video panned around. Men were hugging each other, kissing each other, dancing without music, grinning, cheering. John didn’t know what to think. “I’m not sure I understand,” he said. “That is to say, I understand why it’s important but – they’re so happy about it. It seems so – personal.”

Irene reclaimed the tablet. “You don’t know what you’ve just done, guys. You are both A-list movie stars, and you are now in a publicly acknowledged same-sex relationship. That has never happened before. Ever. It’s unprecedented. Nobody’s going to know what to think. ‘I’m not sure I understand,’” he said. “That is to say, I understand why it’s important but – they’re so happy about it. It seems so – personal.”

Irene snorted a little. “You might say you’re too big to fail.”

“Nobody is too big to fail, not in this business,” Sherlock said.

“As to why these men are happy? Are you serious? Guys – you are heroes now. Do you have any idea how many of them have crushes on one of you? Or both of you? How eagerly they’ve been watching this film’s development? How desperately they’ve wanted to see someone have the courage to just say fuck the police, this is the man I love and you can all go suck rocks? That is what you did tonight, whether you meant to do it or not. It might have been nice to wait, and release a quiet, polite statement next April when the stakes will be lower, but this? This has drama. It has weight. It has ‘mad as hell and can’t take it anymore’ passion. This is what inspires people. And I fucking love you for it, both of you.” She grinned. “Even if I’m not going to be sleeping much for the next few months.”

They went to the reception in the lobby, receiving a healthy round of applause when they appeared. John had expected an immediate deluge of the personal questions about their relationship that they’d shied away from after the screening, but surprisingly, it didn’t happen. Everyone was quite emphatically staying on-topic. “I’m not surprised,” Sherlock muttered, as they paused to get drinks at the open bar. “Everyone’s so eager to prove that they’re above it all, that gossip is of no concern to them and that they’re not watching us like a hawk this very minute.”

“We won’t soon forget this screening,” said a familiar voice behind them. They turned to find Malcolm Dobbs, drink in hand.

“We really didn’t mean to hijack things,” John said.
He shrugged. “I know you didn’t. It’s fine. You handled it with admirable aplomb.”

“I ought to apologize for my outburst,” Sherlock said.

Dobbs eyed him. “If you are, in fact, apologizing, then I accept.”

“You’ve never been a particular fan of mine, Malcolm.”

“You never gave me reason to be. The one time I tried to interview you for the magazine, you left the session in a huff because I was asking too many ‘inane questions.’”

John sighed. “Isn’t he a charmer?”

Dobbs took a drink, speaking in a low voice. “Don’t be fooled, everyone’s talking about it. Just not to you.”

“We know,” Sherlock said. “What’s the consensus?”

“Honestly? Nobody knows what to think. Nothing like this has ever happened before.”

“That’s what Irene says.”

“I’ll say this, though. You’re going to be making a lot of people nervous.”


“Come on, John. First rule of show business is don’t rock the boat. You two are rocking the boat, and there are a lot of people in that little boat with you. Most of them work hard to keep it calmly sailing along and won’t want it to start rocking.”

“We’re not rocking the boat, we’re abandoning ship, to extend this rather tortured metaphor,” Sherlock said. “They can all keep to their jolly little boat, we just won’t be in it.”

“Watch yourselves. You’re going to have a lot of people patting you on the back so they can look for the best spot to stab you in it.”

It was after ten by the time they climbed into the car again. John had never experienced quite the roller coaster of emotions that he had this night. Right now he felt elated, almost giddy, the release of all his nervous tension making him light-headed. No sooner were they into the back seat then Sherlock pulled him half into his lap and proceeded to kiss him senseless.

Irene sighed as she got behind the wheel. “Don’t make me come back there.”

“Oh, you wish,” John teased her.

She started the car. “Home?”

John pushed Sherlock away with an effort. “I don’t feel like going home yet. I’m too jittery. I rather feel as though I’d had eight cups of coffee.”

“What do you want to do?” Sherlock asked.

John looked at him, at his expectant expression, and he knew. “I’d like to take you out on a date. What do you say, Sherlock? Will you go out with me?”
Sherlock smirked, slow and mischievous. “Only if Mum says it’s all right.”

Irene sighed. “Mum says she has a million things to do, so a decision would be smashing.”

John took Sherlock’s hand. “I’d like to take you to a restaurant, walk in together, get a table, sit there and have dinner where anyone could see us. Like a normal couple.”

“Dinner it is!” Irene said, and rocketed out of the parking lot.

John had her take them to the same restaurant where they’d met up the first time for that short and not-so-sweet chat before the shoot. She dropped them off and handed the keys to the valet. “I’ll leave you the car and get a cab home. I’ll probably be at the house early, so try not to be too naked outside the bedroom, okay?”

They waved goodbye and got a table in a corner booth; they sat next to each other with a shared smile at the sheer novelty of it. The maitre d’ looked a little amazed to see them there together, and John realized that he knew. He glanced around and saw eyes flicking to them and away again. A lot of people here knew. He’d known that word traveled fast in this town, but the speed with which this news was spreading was astonishing.

They ordered wine and for a moment, just sat there staring at each other. John finally dissolved into giggles. “I don’t know what to do,” he said.

Sherlock grinned. “Neither do I. This is so strange. After months of avoiding each other in public, to suddenly be here, it’s – surreal. What does one say on dates?” He looked John up and down. “You look – nice?”

John raised an eyebrow. “You saw me put these clothes on six hours ago.”

“And you have looked nice in them ever since. You always look nice.”

“Gosh, just what a chap likes to hear. That he looks nice.”

“Now you’re just taking the piss.”

“You make it so easy.” He fiddled with his napkin. “It’s going to get bad. Next few days in particular.”

Sherlock nodded. “Am I a terrible person to be half-hoping for a major celebrity death to scoop us off the news cycle?”

“I wouldn’t put it past Irene to poison someone’s Metamucil. Someone who was close to the end anyway, of course.”

“Zsa Zsa Gabor.”

“No, she isn’t famous enough. Kirk Douglas, perhaps.” Their eyes met and they both dissolved into horrified giggles.

“We’re going to hell. Very fast, with malice aforethought,” John stammered.

“If you believe in that sort of thing, we were already on the express line.”

Their wine came, then their food. Sherlock groaned suddenly. John frowned, his fork midway to his mouth. “What?”
“John, I’m on Letterman next week.”

“I know, and I’m on Ellen, and then there’s the whole junket to look forward to. This isn’t our first time on publicity tours. Sherlock, they’re not going to ask.”

“Letterman will ask.”

“He might. You and Irene can work out how to handle it.”

“What should we do about the premiere?”

“What do you mean?”

“Should we go – together?”

John stared at his plate. “I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance to think that far ahead.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to think about it now, either. Listen, it isn’t even our job to worry about these things. This is why we pay Irene. No doubt she has a whole action plan with bullet points and staff briefings. We’ll get our marching orders from her. So let’s not talk about it. Let’s talk about anything but, because I am out in public with my dishy partner for the first time and I just want to wallow in it.” He took Sherlock’s hand. “We’re not going to have much time to enjoy each other’s company, not for awhile. It’s going to be a mad two weeks and then we’ll be off to international premieres and I won’t see you for days on end, and then the holidays will be on us before you know it. Let’s just breathe and sit here and talk about normal things like normal people do.”

“I’m not sure I know what normal people talk about.”


Sherlock nodded, still looking a little unsure. “All right. I’ll make the attempt.”

Talking about normal things turned out to be easier than they thought. They talked about the fast-approaching holidays and where they ought to spend them. They talked about their house and whether or not some remodeling was in order, which led to a tentative broaching of the idea of selling John’s house and buying or building one together. They talked about Sherlock’s mother, who’d gotten over being scandalized and was now pestering him endlessly to bring John to meet her. They talked about taking a trip, a long indulgent trip together after the Oscars, and where they might like to go.

Before they knew it, it was nearly midnight and their plates had been cleared, the bill paid, and they were just lingering over coffee, holding hands and talking in low voices. John was becoming a little mesmerized watching Sherlock’s lips move.

“We should probably go home,” Sherlock said, his voice a low purr to which John had developed a bit of a Pavlovian response. “Our waiter is giving us the side-eye.”

“Yes, let’s go home. I intend to shag you blind tonight.”

Before Sherlock could respond, the maitre d’ appeared at their table. “Mr. Watson, Mr. Holmes. Pardon my intrusion. I can see that you’re preparing to leave. I thought it prudent to warn you that a group of photographers has assembled outside the main entrance. If you wish, I will have your car brought to the side entrance, which is clear.”

Sherlock nodded. “Thank you, that would be…”
“No,” John said.

“No?” Sherlock echoed.

“No, we’ll leave through the main entrance. Please have our car brought there.”

“But, John – plenty of people in non-scandalous straight relationships use the side entrance to avoid the paparazzi.”

“I know. But tonight, I just…” He sighed. “We only just stopped hiding, Sherlock. I hate the idea of starting again.”

Sherlock shook his head. “You astonish me, John. It was you who wanted us to keep things secret, after all.”

“Yes, it was, and I still don’t think I was wrong. But it’s done now, it’s out, and I am through hiding. I am going to march right out that front door and I am going to hold your hand while I do it.”

“But why?”

John met his eyes. “Because I’m John Watson, I do what I want, and fuck them.”

He saw an excited sort of light come into Sherlock’s face then, the same light he got when he was tackling a difficult scene or a challenging puzzle or something he couldn’t figure out. “Then let’s go,” he said, rising to his feet and holding out his hand for John’s.

John got up and handed the maitre d’ their valet ticket. The man turned to go, then paused and turned back. “I apologize if this is inappropriate, or if I am crossing a boundary, but may I just say – you made us all proud tonight, gentlemen. My heartfelt congratulations and my very best wishes that this goes well for you.”

John blinked, unexpectedly touched. “Thank you.”

They followed him to the door and waited. He signaled them when their car was at the curb. John looked up at Sherlock, squeezed his hand, and they walked out of the restaurant, hanging on tight.

Chapter End Notes

MetaNotes

1. For those of you who are not American, Fox News is a heavily right-wing slanted news channel likely to vilify John and Sherlock for coming out. Its corresponding lefty channel is MSNBC.

2. The Variety screening series is real; it is a private series of events just like this one and a much-coveted list to be on.

3. The character of Malcolm Dobbs is my invention.
Chapter 14

John Watson woke up in a new world. A world in which he was now a gay man, in a gay romance with another gay man, and everything was just gayer than Dad’s old hatband.

He didn’t feel any different than he had the day before, or than he’d felt before he’d met Sherlock. He’d long ago given up trying to figure out if a particular label fit him. Gay? Bisexual? Straight-with-an-asterisk? Did it matter? He was savvy enough to realize that, regardless of how he viewed himself, the world would apply a set of criteria and judge him to be gay. He was in love with Sherlock. He found him sexually attractive and enjoyed his body. Therefore, he was gay, wasn’t he? But if he were not with Sherlock, would he find other men attractive? Would he seek out a different male partner, or go back to dating women?

If I were not with Sherlock. He couldn’t imagine not being with Sherlock—not anymore. He turned his head to look at him, asleep on his back. The rays of the early sun slanted in their bedroom window and cast shadows over the alien architecture of Sherlock’s face. John’s gaze crawled over him. He’d had ample time to study Sherlock’s features, but he still found something new to appreciate every time he looked at them.

As if he could sense John’s gaze, Sherlock opened his eyes and looked at him across the pillows. He didn’t speak. For a few moments they lay there in silence, sharing body heat and early sunlight within the new reality they’d soon have to face. “I suppose it’s too much to hope for that it was all a dream,” Sherlock murmured, his voice raspy with morning hoarseness.

John smiled. “It wasn’t a dream. And I’m glad. No matter what we’re in for now, I’m glad that the hiding’s over. I’m glad that the world knows that you’re mine.”

Sherlock lifted his hand to John’s cheek. “I’m experiencing a strange sensation. Not quite sure what to make of it.”

“Shall I call a doctor?”

He chuckled. “I don’t believe it’s indicative of a medical condition, but rather of an emotional one. I suspect it’s....” He sighed. “I believe what I’m experiencing is...happiness.”

John’s smile broadened. “It is?”

“Yes. It’s quite remarkable. I’m beginning to understand why people pursue it with such dedication.”

John kissed him softly. “You make me very happy.”

Sherlock’s eyes lingered on John’s lips, his brow furrowing a little. “Do I?”

“Yes.”

“I wish I knew how I am doing that.”

“Is it important to know how?”

“Of course. I wish to keep doing whatever it is that’s making you happy, because I want you to continue to be so. If I don’t know what I am doing to make you happy, I may inadvertently stop.”

“That’s not possible. You’d have to stop being you. I don’t think you’re capable of that.”
“Hmm. Perhaps not.” He pulled John close and kissed him. John kissed back, winding his arms around Sherlock’s slim body. He tipped Sherlock to his back and settled over him.

“You know what I’d like to do today?” he whispered.

“What?”

“I’d like to stay in this bed and do absolutely nothing but make love to you all day long.”

“Hmm. Appealing as that sounds, I suspect that the day has other plans in store for us.”

They both heard the door into the garage bang open, and then Irene’s footsteps. “Boys!” she yelled. “I’m putting the coffee on and then I’m coming up, so if you’re doing it, you have five minutes to finish!”

They both chuckled. “Was she waiting outside for a cue?” John said.

“Five minutes is enough time for a good snog, though,” Sherlock said.

“Then let’s not waste any of it,” John said. He relaxed into Sherlock’s arms and got to the snogging. It was his favorite sort, warm and drowsy and stubbly and wrapped in a cocoon of bedding, hands all over each other, no hurry. Soon enough the smell of coffee drifted into the bedroom, and then they heard Irene’s footsteps on the stairs. They separated, reluctantly, so when Irene strolled into the bedroom with three mugs held in one hand and her gargantuan purse in the other, they were properly situated with all their bits covered.

“Ah. Good. You’re actually awake. I wasn’t sure.” She handed them their mugs and then clambered right up on the foot of the bed, folding her legs under her. She was wearing jeans and a Band of Horses t-shirt, her hair pulled back into a French braid, her face free of makeup. She looked like a college student, ready to clean a house or move some furniture.

“Good morning,” John said, sitting up. She didn’t seem the least bit put off that he and Sherlock were both naked; the three of them had progressed far past the need for modesty.

Sherlock was eyeing her. “You haven’t slept at all, have you?”

“Sleep’s for wimps.” Her eyes did look a bit manic.

“My God, how much coffee have you had already?” John said.

“Coffee? Please. I drink coffee to calm down. I’m on my fifth Rockstar.” She slurped down half her mug. “I hope you guys got some sleep, because it’s going to be a long day.”

“How bad is it? My phone hasn’t been ringing.”

She gave him an ‘oh-honey-you’re-so-clueless’ sort of look. “Please, John. Action Plan Delta involves redirecting all of your incoming phone calls, emails and text messages to my office. Bruno has been filtering all communications since the moment you walked back onstage last night.”

“Ah yes, the mysterious Bruno,” John said.

“He’s collating all incoming inquiries. Don’t worry, he’ll soon be forwarding any that you need to see or hear. And don’t be concerned about your families, Action Plan Delta also involved intercession on their behalf. No press will bother them.”

John barely stopped himself from slapping his forehead. “My family—God, I hadn’t even thought
“Harry’s spoken to your parents and siblings, John. Their phones and email have been secured so that only approved numbers and addresses will get through. They won’t be harassed. I spoke to your brother about this weeks ago, Sherlock, but he assured me that his own procedures were already in place and would be more than adequate.”

“No doubt,” Sherlock said, dryly.

She snuggled her coffee mug between her crossed ankles and got out her iPad. “You want the hate first, or the love?”

They exchanged a glance. “Give us the hate first,” John said.

“Conservative talk radio is having a field day. I won’t bore you with the details of their thoughts on this subject, I’m sure you can fill in the blanks for yourself. There is a radio DJ somewhere in Kansas who’s organizing a drive for everyone to bring in their DVDs of your films so they can have a bonfire.”

“Charming,” Sherlock said. “And not at all Nazi-esque.”

“They’re welcome to burn as many copies of Havana Honeymoon as they like,” John said. “I’ll go buy up all the DVDs I can find and send them along.”

“What about the studio?” Sherlock asked.

Irene grimaced. “Yeah. They’re not thrilled. Jim phoned last night. He was doing his best to straddle the line between being personally happy for you and livid about his movie getting swallowed up by all this.” She swept a finger over her iPad. “There’s the predictable brigade of adoring women who now feel betrayed and denied both of your glorious heterosexual selves. Then you’ve got your standard-issue harpies with their ‘you’re going to hell’ and ‘how dare you show your faces among decent people’ boilerplate.” She sighed. “The media just wants information. People went to press last night, but they pulled their planned cover and put you two on it instead, with an accompanying article. I expect most of the other gossip mags to do the same.”

John’s mind boggled. “They had time to write an article?”

She gave him that ‘oh-honey’ look again. “John, they’ve had that article written for weeks and a cover ready to go. All they had to do was write up the specifics of your revelation. These people are very good at what they do.”

“Oh,” John said, feeling a tad out of his depth.

“It isn’t all bad news. Howard Stern’s been talking about nothing all morning but how awesome you are. According to him you stuck it to the man, or however he put it. For the most part, the Internet is falling all over itself to love you. Oh No They Didn’t is on their fifth Sherlock & John master post and it’s a party in the comments. Your fan forums, for the most part, are beside themselves with rapture. The edited-down version of the Q&A from last night has gone viral. Last I looked, it was up to eight hundred thousand hits and rising fast.”

John shook his head. “I don’t understand how all this happened overnight.”

“Bruno says that nobody goes to bed when there is epic shit happening on the Internet.” Irene grinned. “Okay. We’re having a meeting of Team Awesome in an hour.”
John laughed. “Team Awesome?”

“That is what I have decided we are called. Do not argue with the team captain. You’re just the high-priced talent.”

“And who is on Team Awesome besides us?” John asked.

“Sally and Harry, and Mike and Greg. And Bruno, of course, although he will only be attending via speakerphone. The others are on their way. Harry has promised to bring donuts. So get yourselves up and showered, I’ll be downstairs.” She bounded up and out of the room.

John sighed. “Five Rockstars.”

Sherlock finished his coffee. “I’ll have the first shower, then?”

“Sure, why not.” He watched as Sherlock got out of bed and walked to the bathroom, rubbing a hand through his hair. John cocked his head, appreciating the sway of his narrow hips and the excellent view of his arse. He set his mug aside and flopped back into the pillows.

Fuck, it is going to be a day.

By the time they’d showered and dressed and made it downstairs, Harry was there with donuts and Sally was making more coffee. Irene had set up her iPad with a keyboard at the kitchen table. Bruno’s distinctive chain-smoker rasp was coming from her phone. John had often wondered aloud about the elusive Bruno. Sherlock didn’t volunteer what he’d already deduced about him, namely that he was between twenty-five and thirty, an aspiring musician, hailed from Boston, had at least one postgraduate degree and at least one child whose mother was no longer part of Bruno’s life, and that he was quite desperately in love with Harry Watson. “Letterman’s office just called to make sure that Sherlock’s still confirmed for Tuesday,” he was saying. “Ellen’s office wants to know if John can talk to Ellen this afternoon.”

“That ought to be fine. John, can you talk to Ellen later? I’ll bet you anything she’s going to ask you to do the whole hour with her. Are you up for that?”

“Well, that isn’t till Wednesday. I think my head ought to have stopped spinning by then.”

“Tell her fine, Bruno, and clear that number for to John’s cell phone.”

Greg and Mike arrived with a flurry of sincere, concerned-but-happy-for-you hugs and handshakes. Sherlock was fascinated by the self-contradictory body language on display: cheerful, but worried. Open, but cautious. Everyone seemed conscious of being too grim about all the issues they were now facing when the source of those issues was something that made their clients/employers happy.

When everyone was seated around the table with coffee and donuts, Irene gestured for attention. “All right. Let’s get down to business. In an ideal world all we’d have to do is wish John and Sherlock the best and debate whether they ought to color-coordinate their suits for the premiere, but we don’t live in an ideal world.” Sherlock glanced around at their faces; they all wore serious and determined expressions, as if they were preparing battle strategy. He supposed that’s just what they were, in fact, doing. “First of all, this photo.” She twirled her iPad around to show them the photo of him and John that had been taken last night outside the restaurant. They were holding hands and smiling broadly as they looked at each other. “This is perfect. Everyone is using this photo with their write-ups. Nobody is digging through their archives to find oddball photos of either of you or hunting for ones in which you look even the slightest bit swishy. We’re already controlling the media presence because you decided to walk out the front door like a goddamned boss. Well done.”
“That wasn’t our intent. But I’m glad you approve,” John said, smirking.

“But no more accidental victories. From now on, it’s about being smart. The good news is that we’ve got a lot going for us.”

“We do?” Sherlock said, frowning. “I rather thought we were in dire straits.”

“Well, not as dire as they could be. The first thing we have going for us is that you’ve inadvertently chosen the exact right time for this. If you’d actually intended to come out before the film’s release, I would have advised you to do so two to three weeks ahead of it. Two weeks is forever in the media. It’s close enough to the release to be a publicity boost, but far enough out that most of the histrionics will be over and there’s an excellent chance that a bigger story will have bumped you off the headlines by opening day. The second point in our favor is the spontaneity of what happened last night. Nobody who sees that video can possibly question its sincerity. It’s honest, real and unpremeditated, and that makes it sympathetic. Everything about how it happened makes it achingly clear just how hard it is to hide, and how unfair and wrong it is that anyone should be made to do so. It makes people root for you. There’s also the fact that neither of you were in a relationship when you got together, so you’re not leaving behind any broken hearts or traumatizing any photogenic children. And last but definitely not least, neither of you are—to be blunt, neither of you flame. I hate to put it in those terms, but that’s the truth of it. If the great gay brunch confab in the sky had engineered an A-List couple to be the first to come out together, they couldn’t have done much better than you two.”

John had a tentative smile on his face. “Is this your way of bucking us up? Because I have to say, it’s working.”

“Don’t get too comfy. Now it’s all about managing the information and the media presence. We have to walk a very fine line here, folks. It’s going to be an onslaught and I know it’s going to be uncomfortable, but you two can’t go into hiding. It’ll look like you’re ashamed or that you regret it, or that you’re too chicken to face the world. But you can’t be everywhere, grinning into every camera, because then it’ll look like you’re playing into all the press and taking advantage of it. That will make people wonder if you did it on purpose, and you can kiss all the underdog sympathy goodbye. So you have to be out in the world, but not too much.”

Harry had her head in her hands. “Bloody hell, this is like plotting the Normandy invasion.”

“The first step has to be the press release,” Greg said. “We need to get it out as soon as possible. Right now it’s about rumor control. They’re going to start making things up themselves if we don’t give them something.”

“Way ahead of you,” Irene said, passing around sheets of paper. “This is the draft of the statement you two will release. Read it, we’ll make any changes that need making, and Bruno will release it immediately.”
Should we really be making political statements in the release?” Mike asked.

“We have to,” Irene said. “We have to acknowledge that last night wasn’t planned, and that they were lying about being just friends, and that means we have to say why. We’re not taking any positions in the release, that isn’t what it’s for.”

John nodded. “I like it. It’s direct.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I suppose.”

“You don’t like it?” John said.

“I dislike all this euphemistic, desaturated language. Although I don’t suppose it would be terribly constructive to release a statement that says ‘Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are really chuffed to announce that they’re shagging quite a lot, fancy each other to bits and would like to politely but emphatically invite anyone who doesn’t like it to go rot.’”


John was grinning at him. “Have I told you today that I fucking adore you?”

Sherlock felt himself blush. “Such are the sorts of things one does not weary of hearing.”

John slid a hand around the back of his neck, pulled him in and kissed him quickly, then sat back. It
was the first time they’d kissed in front of others. Nobody seemed fazed. “So we’re agreed on this wording?” Nods. “All right, you got that, Bruno?”

“Ten-four, chief,” he said.

“Okay. Our next task is going to be planning how we set you two loose on the world. Greg, Mike, how big is the camp of cameras outside the gate?”

“Looked like around fifty.”

John’s eyes widened. “Fifty? Paparazzi?”

“Not as many as I was afraid of, actually. Now, the minute either of you two leave, they are going to follow you. So here’s the plan. Today, you are each going to go out on your own. We’ll wait a few days to send you out together. John, you’re going to go to the gym at ten. Sherlock, you are having a late lunch with Emma Hudson at two.”

“Oh, I am, am I?”

“Yes, you are. I called Emma and asked if she could help us out. I need you to be seen with someone famous enough to be identifiable but who wouldn’t be seen as a romantic rival for John. Emma was happy to oblige us.”

Sherlock grit his teeth. He didn’t like being handled and given marching orders like he was a five-year-old being escorted to dance class and play dates. He recognized the necessity of what Irene was doing, but it still felt intrusive and patronizing.

You got everyone into this with your outburst last night, Holmes. Square up and suffer the consequences.

He felt John’s hand on his leg, a quick stroke and a pat. He glanced over at him. John wasn’t looking at him, but Sherlock could sense his understanding and his commiseration. He didn’t like this any more than Sherlock did. But at least they weren’t going through it alone.

Irene folded her hands on the table. She looked pretty grim. “Here’s the hard part, guys. While you’ve both had plenty of experience with the paparazzi, what you are about to go through with them will be unlike anything you’ve ever experienced. It will be the full-court press. It will be an assault. They will surround you, they will impede your ability to walk, they will shove and push and trample and crowd you. They will shout the vilest, nastiest slurs at you that they can in an effort to get a reaction. They will insult people you love. They will make vulgar remarks about your sex life. There is nothing they’d like more than to get a picture of one of you angry, or shouting. If they could get one of you to take a swing at them, that would be the goddamned mother lode. Am I making myself clear? This is going to be horrifically unpleasant, but you have to do it. Do whatever you have to do in your own head to stay in control. Do your best to look calm and Zen-like. Nobody’s expecting a big grin, in fact that would look disingenuous. You have to look unruffled and like you’re in total control. This is going to be the hardest acting job of your lives.”

She stopped and took a breath. John was peering at her. “Irene, you sound…upset.”

“You think John should spend a full hour on Ellen’s show?” Sherlock asked.
“Yes, if she asks. He won’t find a more receptive audience or a more understanding host. It’ll be an excellent chance to do some spin control.”

John looked at his watch. “Blimey, it’s gone nine already. I best get my things and be off to the gym if I’m going, then. Irene, is there anything else?”

“Oh, tons more, but it can wait. Go ahead.” He jumped up and headed upstairs.

Sherlock stayed where he was, feeling moody. He could feel their eyes on him. “This is going to be worse for him than for me, isn’t it?” he said.

Irene sighed. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Why worse for John?” Harry said, frowning.

“Because of the sorts of actors they are, and the niches they inhabit,” Greg said. “Sherlock’s more of an aesthete. He’s an upper-class highbrow sort of actor who does Shakespeare and Mamet between films. As such, he’s already seen as something of an outsider. He’s a bit more out there. John’s an Everyman. He’s—pardon the slight on his nation of origin, but he’s the All-American guy next door. People will have an easier time with Sherlock being gay than with John.”

“What about his career?” Sherlock asked.

Greg sighed. “Well, it’s a damn good thing he was looking for a change, because he’ll most certainly be making one. Romantic comedies are most likely a thing of the past, not that he’ll be sad about that. Both of you will probably have to stay away from romantic leading roles for awhile, maybe several years. Maybe more.”

John trotted down the stairs, his gym bag over his shoulder. Everyone got up at once. John laughed. “Jesus Christ, you all look like you’re about to send me off to war. It’s just the gym. You know. Few lat pulls, a little time on the elliptical?”

Irene was rubbing her own arms. “Remember what I said, okay? Zen-like and calm. Don’t engage. Just try to put yourself inside a little force field.”

“Relax, Irene. I’m a big boy. I can handle it.” He turned and went to the door. Sherlock followed him.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried,” he said.

John sighed. “We’ve got to face the world sooner or later, sweetheart.”

Sherlock blinked. “Did you just call me ‘sweetheart’?”

John fidgeted, blushing. “Yeah, I did. Sorry, it just sort of popped out.”

“Hmm. I think—yes, I think I liked it.”

A smile broke over John’s face. “Really?”

“In small doses, perhaps.” He bent and kissed him. “Good luck.”

“If I need to go to a happy place, I’ll close my eyes and be in your house in Sussex, with you,” John said.

“If that is not a happy place then none exists.”
John grinned and left. Sherlock was left staring at the door, hoping to get him back in one piece.

_Paparazzi, fucking paparazzi_, John thought as he drove to the gym. He felt like he was in _Bullitt._

They were all around him. Motorcycles, vans, cars, and half of them were on phones or radios. They had been lying in wait outside the gate to his neighborhood, and sure enough, they knew it was him immediately. They snapped photos of him as he drove by, although he wasn’t sure what they could see through the tinted windows. Then they leapt onto motorbikes and into cars and followed him.

John parked in the gym’s lot. He saw the paps parking and racing each other towards his car. _Zen-like and calm. Zen-like and calm._

_Sherlock in the hot tub at Mount Shasta. Lying with Sherlock under the stars in Sussex._

_Happy place, happy place, happy place._

He took a deep breath and got out of the car.

He almost couldn’t get the door open, they were crowding him so close. He was bloody glad he’d worn sunglasses, because it was worse than a photocall. He was in a forest of moving cameras; eight zillion flashbulbs went off six inches from his face. He started towards the door and they moved with him.

Then they were shouting.

He tried not to listen, but he couldn’t help but hear.

*John how long have you been gay John who’s on the bottom do you like sucking cock does he beg for it I bet he begs for it John who’s the man John who’s the girl how do you like it how does he like it how long have you taken it up the arse how long have you sucked dick how long were you lying do you have AIDS who else have you slept with did you sleep with are you sleeping with….*

They crowded closer. He could hardly move forward. He’d soon have to fight his way through.

_Don’t fight. They don’t want you to walk? Don’t._

John stopped in his tracks. He stood stock-still and crossed his arms over his chest, staring vaguely down towards the pavement. He closed his eyes behind his sunglasses and focused on breathing. The cameras kept snapping, the flashes kept flashing, the shouters kept shouting.

He didn’t move. He waited.

He remembered something Sherlock had once told him about how some theater actors discouraged the paparazzi from camping out at the stage door; they would wear the same clothes each night when they left the theater, so no matter what day the paps showed up, it looked like the same photo. Nobody would pay for the same photograph over and over, so it negated their incentive to show up.

John didn’t move a muscle. They could take photos of him as long as they liked, but they’d all look the same. This same position, this same boring pose. They’d have to give up eventually; at least, he hoped they would.

He was amazed how well it worked. Within a minute, the shouting had stopped. Within two, the camera flashes and clicks had died down. He didn’t move. Gradually, one by one, the photographers started backing away. Realizing he wasn’t going to move until they did, they lowered their cameras
and eased off.

Finally, after he’d stood there for a good five minutes, there was blessed quiet. He raised his head, glanced around at them, and gave a brief nod. Unimpeded, he headed for the door of the gym. They didn’t follow him. He heard a few isolated shutter-clicks as he entered the gym, but then he was inside and safe.

“Jesus, John,” said the trainer behind the desk. It was Phil, one of John’s favorite sparring partners. “That looked like a nightmare.”

“I’m the flavor of the moment. They’ll find a new victim to feed on soon enough.”

“You okay?” Phil asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. I guess you’ve heard, then,” John said, as they walked up to the workout floor.

“Fuck me, everyone’s heard.” They came into the large, airy space full of cardio machines, free weights and weight machines. Everyone turned to look. “We’ve got more’n one gay trainer here, and of course a good number of the members are queer. I never thought you were, though.”

“Me neither,” John said, smiling. “Funny how falling in love with a man can alter your perceptions.”

Phil laughed. “Yeah, I guess it might do that. Hey, let me know if you want to spar after your cardio, okay?”

“Will do. I might need to work out some aggression today.”

Phil left him to his workout. John started on the treadmill, cranking it up to the fastest jogging speed he was comfortable with, then jacking up the incline. It felt good to run, just to pound the treadmill deck, to feel his heart thump in his chest and sweat pour down his face, to let the rush of blood drive all the thoughts from his head and the poison from his veins.

He ran six miles, walked one more to cool down, then hopped off and headed for the drinking fountain. Halfway there, a tall meathead sort of bloke bumped into him, rather hard. “Oh, excuse me, mate,” John said, even though he wasn’t at fault. He started to pass on by.

“Watch it, faggot,” the bloke muttered.

John stopped in his tracks. Did that just happen? “What’d you say?” he said, incredulous.

The meathead immediately whirled around, all dramatic, like he’d been hoping John would challenge him. “I said watch it, faggot.” John could only blink in amazement. He was caught totally off-guard. He’d known this could happen, of course, but it had never occurred to him that someone might slag off him in a gym in Beverly Hills. “Guess all you actors are fags, huh?” he said, smirking like he was putting a good one over on John.

John glanced around. Nobody seemed to have heard him, at least. The last thing John wanted or needed just now was a big dramatic scene. “My private life is none of your business,” John said. He tried to walk by again, but his new friend wasn’t having it.

“That all you got to say, then?” the bloke said. His voice was rising.

“I don’t want to get into it, all right?”

“Maybe I don’t want a fag staring at my ass, ever think of that?”
John stared at him. *Well, John. Here he is. Your very first homophobe. Maybe I should thank him for taking my bigot-virginity, although that might not go over so well. It was an unfortunate thought, because all it did was make John bust out laughing.*

The meathead’s frown deepened. “What the fuck are you laughing at?”

“Oh my God,” John said, still laughing. “Really? That’s what you’re going with? Calling me a fag and fretting that I’ll stare at your arse?” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I was actually worried about people like you.” John wiped at his eyes. “You sound like Central Casting sent you over, mate.” He walked around the man, who just looked confused now, and didn’t try to stop him. “Oh, by the way? You needn’t worry about being stared at. Your arse can’t begin to compare to my boyfriend’s.”

He walked to the drinking fountain, grinning and a bit giddy. The fearsome specter of his imaginings had materialized, called him a faggot right to his face, and he’d survived. He hadn’t melted with embarassment, or boiled over with rage. In fact, the fearsome specter had turned out to be more ridiculous than scary.

He filled his water bottle. *If only I could believe that they’d all be so easily vanquished.*

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John got home just after noon, still on a bit of a high from his encounter with the meathead at the gym. He wasn’t naïve enough to think that all people who would wish him ill would be quite as mustache-twirlingly obvious about it, though. If it was never any worse than that, he could deal with it; the problem was that he knew that in all likelihood, it would get worse.

Greg and Mike’s cars were gone, but Harry, Sally and Irene’s were still there. He hoped he’d be able to sneak off for half an hour alone with Sherlock, because he was a bit worked up and horny as hell.

The first thing he noticed upon entering the house was the smell. It smelled like…like…a funeral. Frowning, he walked through into the kitchen, then stopped short.

The kitchen counters, the table, and the breakfast bar were covered in flower arrangements, fruit baskets, and other gifts of varying sizes and degrees of lavishness. Harry came in, carrying another one. “Oh, John! Glad you’re back, Sherlock’s been envisioning doomsday scenarios.”

“What the hell is all this?”

“They started arriving just after you left. Eighteen so far. This one’s from Neil and David.” She plucked the card off cookie bouquet, munching on one of the blooms, and read it out. “‘Welcome to the dark side. And it’s true, we do have cookies!’ Best wishes, et cetera. I think every out gay couple in the world has sent you flowers. And some other people, too. This one’s from Wills and Kate.”

His jaw dropped. *Wills and Kate sent us flowers?*

“They did, indeed. Their card was all proper and polite, but it came down to the same thing. Congratulations, way to strike a blow for equality, blah blah blah.”

“Save that card, Mum will want to have it bronzed or something.”

He heard Sherlock’s footsteps thundering down the stairs. “John, is that you?”

“Yeah,” he said, bemusedly looking at the bouquets.

Sherlock burst into the kitchen and enveloped him in a hug. “Oh good, all your limbs are still
attached. How was it? Was it awful? How bad was it?"

“Um…both worse and better than I expected. Blimey, Sherlock, look at all these flowers!”

Sherlock flapped an impatient hand. “Meaningless gestures.”

“Not meaningless to me!”


“Oh. Well…yes, a few things happened. Let’s get Irene and I’ll tell you about it.”

They found Irene in the den, working on her iPad. John told them everything about his experience, from the technique he’d used to defuse the paparazzi to his encounter with the meathead. “They were both bad experiences, but I dealt with them, I lived, and I won’t be quite as nervous next time.”

The doorbell rang again. “I’ll get it,” Sally said. Harry was on the phone to someone and Irene was back on her iPad. John, his patience at its limit, pulled Sherlock to his feet and out of the den.

Sherlock ducked his head and kissed John’s neck. “I find it arousing when you come home sweaty,” he growled against his skin.

“I know; that’s why I did,” John said. “Throwing it in that arsehole’s face got my blood up and all I’ve wanted to do since is bend you over a chair and make you scream,” he said, low and intense into Sherlock’s ear.

“God, John,” Sherlock groaned. He grabbed his hand and practically dragged him up the stairs. “Half an hour until I’ve got to get ready for Emma.”

“What’ll we do with the other twenty minutes?” John said, kicking the bedroom door shut behind him.

“Sherlock, darling,” Emma trilled, reaching up to hug him. Sherlock smiled and bent down to hug her back.

“Thanks for meeting me. I know it was, erm, short notice,” he said, taking his seat across from her in the café. Normally he’d prefer to eat on the patio, but he didn’t dare, with the paparazzi circling like buzzards.

She flapped a hand. “Pish tosh, I’m happy to help. I’m glad I was still in town; I’m heading back to London next week.” She looked toward the window where a crowd of photographers was lurking outside. “Have you had that pack of wolves on your tail all day?”

“This is the first time I’ve left the house today, but they’ve been on me the whole trip, yes. Thank God for valet parking, I was able to get out of the car and inside before they caught up to me. John had quite a run-in at the gym earlier.” He gave her the quick rundown of John’s gym excursion.

She clucked her tongue. “It isn’t right, you two being pursued like this.”

“It’ll die down. The novelty will wear off, and something newer and more sensational will turn up. Just because John and I are out now doesn’t mean we’re suddenly going to start falling down drunk at clubs or going to rave parties and snorting lines off underwear models. We’re as boring as we ever were.”

They ordered drinks. The waiter gave Sherlock a flirty little smile. He frowned; that was the second
time a man had done such a thing; the valet had winked at him when he took his keys. “I’m so happy for you, Sherlock,” Emma said. “You brought a tear to my eye at that screening. You sounded so terribly frayed.”

He nodded. “I was. I’m sorry I’ve let us in for all this insanity, but I can’t say I’m not glad to have things out in the open. I’m just relieved John isn’t angry about it.”

“He’s a good sort, your John.”

Sherlock smiled. “Much more so than I deserve. Part of me is waiting for him to come to his senses and wonder what the bloody hell he’s doing with a bastard like me.”

“Emma?” came a new voice.

They both looked up to see Fiona Beesley, the second assistant director from To a Stranger. “Oh, Fiona dear, hello!” Emma said, half-rising to hug her. Sherlock waited to be acknowledged, but Fiona seemed to be deliberately ignoring him. “Um…,” Emma said, glancing at Sherlock, “how are you?”

“I’m well, thanks. I’ve just been hired on as first AD for de Palma’s new film, we start pre-production in a few weeks.” Fiona was standing so her back was half-turned toward Sherlock. Emma looked puzzled, but he wasn’t.

“And hello to you, too, Fiona,” he said, his tone icy.

Fiona hesitated, then turned to face him. Her face was like stone. “Sherlock,” she said, the minimum allowable response to his greeting.

He sat back, cocking his head. “I gather you are unhappy with me.”

“Are you surprised? I took a pay cut to work on that film, a lot of us did, and you just threw the whole thing under the bus without a thought.”

“Is that what you think? That I don’t care what happens to the film?”

“Not enough to keep quiet, obviously. You couldn’t stay in the closet for just one more month?”

He held her gaze for a moment, seeing not just her present irritation, but the older pain that it was masking. “I’m sorry that your brother was discharged from the Marines for being gay, but that isn’t my fault.”

Her eyes widened. “How the hell did you—no, it doesn’t matter, I don’t want to know. And this isn’t about Jason, it’s about this business and your privilege. I’ve got friends who’ve been in the closet for years, but they can’t do what you did because they don’t have an Oscar sitting on their mantel.”

“If you think that’s going to earn me any special dispensations, you’ll be pleased to know that it won’t.”

“Then what about John? Did he want this?”

Sherlock swallowed hard. He was already feeling guilty enough about that as it was without having it thrown into his face. “No, he didn’t,” he said.

She sighed. “I must be crazy, talking to you like this, but honestly, I am fresh out of fucks to give.
That film was going to be important, and now all it’ll be is the movie where the lead actors turned gay for each other.”

Sherlock crossed his legs and looked up at her. “I’m afraid that the film was always going to be the one where the lead actors ‘turned gay,’ as you put it, no matter when we went public. The only way to avoid that would have been to stay closeted forever, and that was never an option that we considered.”

Fiona seemed to deflate a little. “It must be nice to be famous enough that it’s an option, and not a necessity. It was nice to see you, Emma.” She turned and left the café.

Emma shook her head. “That was uncalled for,” she said, sounding irritated. “She’s got no right to get so shirty with you.”

“I’m sure she isn’t alone in the sentiment.”

“I worked on the film too, Sherlock. I don’t bear you any ill will.”

“Thank you. I fear there’ll be very few people whose good opinion I can trust going forward. No one will dare publicly denounce us for fear of looking bigoted, so I may find myself surrounded by people who may smile, and smile, and be villains.”

Emma smiled. “At least it may be so in Hollywood.”

“I knew I could count on you.” He sobered. “It is disconcerting to have to wonder who in this business now thinks ill of me.”

“You’ll drive yourself mad trying to work that out, dear. We all do, all the time.”

“I’ve never much concerned myself with other people’s opinions. Why on Earth does it matter so much now?”

“Because it’s not you you’re really worried about, luv. It’s John. Things start to matter when they’re happening to someone we love.”

Sherlock nodded. “I’d gladly trade my own career if it meant that his would flourish. I don’t care if they hate me, but I can’t bear to think of anyone hating him because of me.”

“That’s because you’re afraid of losing him, Sherlock.” Emma’s voice had gone serious. It was easy to forget, given her habitual dotty-English-granny manner, that she was a sharp-minded student of human behavior who’d never had much trouble sussing him out. “You fear any consequences he may suffer because he chose you, because you don’t really believe that you can possibly be worth it to him. But you are. He’s chosen you over everything. He took your hand and pulled you back out on that stage, because he loves you and he didn’t want to see you suffer anymore. Can’t you respect his decision? You didn’t railroad him into this. John’s a grown man. He’s thrown in his lot with you and I reckon he means for it to stick.”

Sherlock smiled. “You do have a way of putting things to me straight, don’t you?”

She winked. “No pun intended.”

They laughed together as the waiter brought their food, which came with yet another wink and a slightly too-long look. “Emma, I don’t think I am imagining that at least four blokes have tried to pull me since I came in here, nor am I imagining the three others in this dining room who are watching me while trying to be subtle about it.”
“Oh, you aren’t, dear.”

“Are they not aware that I’m quite spoken for?”

“Oh, yes. Welcome to this side of the table, Sherlock, and the wonderful world of the male gaze. I daresay you’ll be surprised by it. Now, tell me everything.”

Sherlock found himself babbling quite easily about what had happened the night before, and his date with John afterwards. Emma was a sympathetic listener and a savvy observer, a combination that made him want to share his innermost thoughts and wax rhapsodic about John.

He was in the middle of telling her about all the flowers and gifts they’d been sent when the hostess came up to the table. “Excuse me, Mr. Holmes.”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but there’s a pair of young men up front who want me to ask you if it’d be all right for them to speak to you briefly. Something about a theater?”

Sherlock looked past her. Two young men in jeans and t-shirts, both overtly gay, one with dreadlocks and one with bright ginger hair, were hovering near the door, trying to look nonchalant. They were holding stacks of fliers and wearing eager expressions. “All right,” he said.

The hostess went to the young men, who grinned and hurried back to his table. “Mr. Holmes, thanks so much,” Dreadlocks gushed. “We were putting up fliers and we saw all the paparazzi and then we saw you in here and…well, we just had to risk it.”

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” Sherlock said in his best polite-actor voice. His eyes flicked over his visitors. Dreadlocks came from money but had distanced himself from his family – Midwestern, probably Plains – when he came out. He was attending film school, probably USC, had a boyfriend of at least two years, and was a vegetarian, possibly vegan. Ginger was from Seattle, maintained close ties with his family and was single. He had at least one other job as a server and owned a cat – no, two cats.

“We work at an art-house theater in West Hollywood. Just a two-screener. After what happened last night…well, everybody’s pretty excited!” said Ginger, grinning.

Dreadlocks gave him a ‘calm the fuck down’ sort of look. “We’re having a little impromptu event tonight,” he said. He handed Sherlock a surprisingly well-designed flier advertising the “Sherlock & John Film Festival,” which featured Kanisza and Rewind, along with the full video of the Variety Q&A and a surprise of some sort.

Sherlock couldn’t help but smile. “You chaps don’t waste any time, I’ll give you that,” he said.

“Oh, we were all on chat watching the Q&A last night. We can’t wait for To a Stranger. In fact we’re having a midnight showing next week, with a party beforehand. As soon as we saw how you and Mr. Watson—well, you know, we all started talking about having a special showing of your movies, which turned into a film festival! I hope you approve of the films we picked,” Ginger said, looking worried. “I wanted to show Out of Noise because everyone’s seen Kanisza.”

“Not everyone,” Dreadlocks said. “And it’s really popular! I’m still not sure about Rewind. Maybe we ought to show one of his dramatic films.”

“Well, Rewind is John’s most famous film,” Sherlock said. “It’s my personal favorite of the romantic comedies he’s done. He’ll just be glad you’re not showing Havana Honeymoon.”
“What’s super exciting is that we’re getting to show a ten-minute preview of To a Stranger! Your publicist set it up for us!”

“Oh, you spoke to Irene?”

“She was super nice. I mean, it was a long shot; we called her because we thought maybe you would come to the film festival. She said that you weren’t available, but she’d call Focus and get then to send us an extended clip to show. We’re having a raffle, too, for charity. We’re donating the proceeds to The Trevor Project.” Dreadlocks was clearly quite caught up in this little event. “Which is why we—uh, I mean the reason we came over is that we were hoping you might sign one of the fliers for us. It’d be an amazing item for the raffle.”

“Certainly.” Sherlock accepted a Sharpie from Ginger, and signed his name in one of the blank spaces. “Would it not be worth more for your raffle if John were to sign it, too?”

Dreadlocks and Ginger looked at each other, eyes wide, like their wildest dreams had just come true. “Oh my god, would it ever! It’d be, like, historic! Your first ever joint signing after you came out! That would be so legendary!”

Emma was giggling a bit at their enthusiasm. Sherlock couldn’t help but want to make their day. “Then I’ll take this home with me, I’m sure he’ll be happy to sign it. I’ll have it messaged over to your theater before your event; would that suffice?”

Ginger looked to be on the verge of tears. “Mr. Holmes, that would be so amazing, you have no idea. You’d really do that for us?”

“It’s not an inconvenience. Here, give me three, we can sign more than one for you. You might ask my lunch companion to sign one, she’s in the film, too.”

Ginger and Dreadlocks looked over at Emma, who they hadn’t even noticed. Their jaws dropped. “Oh my God, Ms. Hudson!” Dreadlocks exclaimed. “You are my absolute favorite! That film you did with Anthony Hopkins, I cry every time I watch it, like a little baby, it’s pathetic.”

She smiled. “Well, thank you, boys.”

“We’d love to have you sign a flier.”

“I’ll sign separately,” she said. “You’ll be wanting some with just the men of the hour.” She winked at Sherlock and signed two fliers for them. Ginger full-on jumped up and down when she handed them back.

“Could we maybe get a photo?” Dreadlocks asked, looking embarrassed to be making the request, but Sherlock had been waiting for it.

“All right.” They conscripted the hostess to take a photo, then Dreadlocks and Ginger took their fliers and left in a flurry of thanks and handshakes and general star-struck euphoria.

Emma shook her head. “Sherlock, you are a revelation to me. There was a time you’d have told those boys to piss off and leave you be.”

“Perhaps I’m learning to value those who are enthusiastic about me, Emma. I need all the help I can get.”

Irene had a good laugh when Sherlock told her about his encounter at the café. “I spoke to the owner
of that theater earlier. He wanted you two to come make an appearance at his little festival. As if.”

“How do you know we wouldn’t?” John said.

“Oh, I figured you would, which is why I said no. John, you’ve been out of the closet for one day, it is way too soon for you two to start jumping feet-first into gay-themed events. It’ll look like you’re sucking up to the community, and it’ll shove you even further into the ‘gay actor’ label, which is what we’d like to avoid. But signing these fliers is harmless enough, it’s a nice gesture.”

John added his signature to the three Sherlock had already signed. Irene took their photo holding them and Sally went off to print it. “What else can we sign for them?” John said, looking around. “Oh! I know! We’ve got a few nice, fresh copies of the EW with us on the cover, let’s sign one of those and send it along!” Silver paint pens were located and they both signed the front of the magazine. Sherlock watched, bemused, as John drew a big heart on the cover with an arrow through it, and the initials “JW + SH” inside it.

“John, what on Earth are you doing?”

“I think it’s called ‘getting carried away.’ I’m inclined to indulge people who are actually happy that we came out.”

“Oh, wait!” Irene said. She rummaged in her bag and came out with a program from the Variety screening. “How about this?”

“Fuck, yeah!” John said, grabbing it. He signed it and handed it over to Sherlock, who did the same, chuckling.

“I’m a little afraid of where this is heading,” he said. “I’m rather glad my Oscar is in London, you two would have me donating that to this raffle as well.”

“I think this’ll do,” John said, looking at the nice little stack of items they’d rounded up.

“My friends from the café may just faint with shock,” Sherlock said, dryly. “They nearly had simultaneous strokes when I told them I’d get you to sign the fliers as well.”

John smiled at him, a fond look on his face. “That was right nice of you, Sherlock. See, I knew all along that you weren’t such a bastard as everyone said.”

“No, they were right. I was and still am a bastard. I am just less so around people I give two shits about.”

John finally had to throw everyone out at nine o’clock. “But…but…” Irene stammered. “John, we have to talk about Ellen, and we haven’t even thought about the premiere yet…”

“It’ll wait,” he said, half-carrying her to the door. “You’re going to crash soon, not even Rockstar can keep you up for two days straight, and I’d like my house back, please.”

She, Sally and Harry reluctantly allowed themselves to be bundled off. John shut the door after them with a grateful sigh, then waited until he actually heard their cars start up and drive away.

“Are they gone?”

“Yes,” John said, going back to the den, where Sherlock was sprawled on the couch with his laptop. He flopped down at the other end, lifting Sherlock’s feet and resettling them on his lap. He picked up
the remote and turned on E! News.

"Hollywood is still reeling from what is shaping up to be the biggest story of the year: that John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, two of the big screen’s top leading men, have been romantically involved for several months. The pair, who met while filming the Ang Lee drama To a Stranger, revealed their relationship at a screening of the film last night in Beverly Hills. The viral video of the spontaneous, emotionally charged moment has been viewed over three million times today. In a statement released through their shared publicist, Holmes and Watson have acknowledged that they hid their relationship for the sake of the film and their careers, but that this secrecy became too painful to bear. Reactions have ranged from excitement to shock to dismay. Watson was seen today suffering through a horde of photographers while visiting his gym, while Holmes shared lunch with friend and To a Stranger co-star Emma Hudson. Neither have spoken publicly since their statement."

“Hear that?” John said. “We’re the biggest story of the year.”

“The fact that such a characterization can be made with a straight face is a sad testimony to the arsed-up priorities of this society,” Sherlock muttered.

“To be fair, I do think they meant the biggest entertainment story of the year.”

“Even so. A couple of British chaps shacking up should hardly be cause for such extravagant comment.”

“Shouldn’t be, no. But it is.”

Sherlock sighed and shut his laptop. “I’m going to have a soak. It’s been a bloody long day.” He pulled his feet from John’s lap, tossed his computer aside and walked out. John watched him go, frowning. Usually he’d have left John with a kiss, or at the very least a fond look.

E! News was still on, but John wasn’t paying attention. He sat there for a few minutes, a vague disquiet growing in his belly. He’d never said so, but one of the reasons he had been keen to wait until after the Oscars to go public was for the sake of their relationship. He had known how it would be, and as far as he was concerned, the more time they had to solidify what they had together, the better. If they had waited until April, they would have been together a good seven or eight months before having to face the media circus. Now, it was barely more than two.

They were solid; he knew they were. But they were still feeling their way around their raw edges, testing the seam where their lives were knitting together, tucking in the loose threads and picking up the dropped stitches. His confidence in their ability to weather this storm together was undercut by his awareness of just how much it would destroy him to lose Sherlock now. He couldn’t. He couldn’t even think about it. Sherlock was the most important person in his life, the most important person he’d ever had in his life. Sherlock was his partner, his companion, his harshest critic and his biggest fan; he was his lover, and he was his best friend.

John had never feared losing someone the way he feared losing Sherlock, because he’d never in his life loved anyone the way he loved Sherlock.

He got up, turned off the telly, and went up the stairs. He could hear the drip-drip of the faucet and feel the humidity from Sherlock’s bath. He hesitated, then stripped off his own clothes and walked nude into the bathroom.

Sherlock was slouched low enough in the water that it covered his chin. Steam rose all around him, making his hair curl fetchingly around his face. He looked over as John approached. Feeling a little
shy, and uncertain if his presence was welcome, John padded over to the tub decking and sat on the edge. He looked down at Sherlock’s face, flushed with heat.

Sherlock sighed, then reached out with a dripping hand and took John’s. He guided it to his own face and pressed a kiss to the center of his palm, holding it there. He tugged on John’s arm and gestured with his chin. *Come in here, in with me.*

John carefully stepped into the tub, not wanting to step on Sherlock or, worse, slip and turn the entire enterprise into a tangle of limbs and splashed water. Sherlock pulled him close and settled him back against his chest, his arms circling John’s shoulders from behind. John relaxed, the heat of the water and Sherlock’s body soaking into his muscles. He let out a long breath and twined his fingers with Sherlock’s.

They didn’t speak. John’s mind raced, searching for a way to express his lurking unease and ask for what he needed to quell it. *I need you. Promise me this won’t tear us apart. I love you. Tell me you love me, for better or for worse. Tell me I’m enough. Tell me I’m all you’ll ever need. Tell me all these things and I’ll tell you the same. Swear we’ll get through this. Let me hear you say it because nobody warned me that a side effect of being wildly in love is that you need reassurance that you’re not alone in it.*

He screwed up his courage up to say—something, though he wasn’t sure what it would be. He took a breath, sat up, and turned so he could look in Sherlock’s eyes, but whatever had been about to come out stalled in his throat and slunk back down, because he saw there the same fear that he’d been wrestling with all day.

Sherlock put a finger on his lips. “Yes,” he whispered. “All of it, yes.”
Interlude

[from Late Show with David Letterman, aired on Tuesday, November 22]

Letterman: My first guest tonight is an Oscar-winning actor; his new film, To a Stranger, opens next Friday. Please welcome Sherlock Holmes!

[The audience cheers wildly. Paul and the band play a jazzy rendition of “Sharp Dressed Man.” Sherlock enters, looking just a tad nervous, wearing a well-cut gray suit and a deep-cobalt-blue shirt that’s open at the throat. Wolf-whistles and shouts come from the women in the audience. He shakes hands with Dave and sits down. The camera pans over the audience to show that most of them are standing and cheering enthusiastically, but there are a scattered few who are still seated, not applauding. Sherlock smiles, uncertain what to make of this enthusiastic reception. Dave makes a gesture toward Sherlock and the audience cheers anew. Sherlock half-rises and waves again, then sits. The audience calms.]

Letterman: Welcome to the show! This is your first visit.

Sherlock: Indeed, yes, it is.

Letterman: So!

Sherlock: So.

Letterman: What’s new?

[The audience laughs. Sherlock chuckles. A fresh wave of applause]

Sherlock: Oh, not much. The usual.

Letterman: I know you’re here for your film, but we do have to talk about that thing.

Sherlock: What thing would that be, then?

[laughter]

Letterman: Oh, you’re going to be like that, are you?

Sherlock: Haven’t you heard? I’m difficult to work with. [he smirks a bit]

Letterman: I might have heard something about that. [laughter] You know, through the grapevine. We’ve never been able to get you on the show before.

Sherlock: It was nothing personal. I’m rubbish at these sorts of things. But this is an important film, and it means a great deal to me, so I want to do everything I can to support it.

Letterman: I saw it last night and I gotta say, I was blown away. Blown. Away.

Sherlock: Thank you.

Letterman: Paul cried. Didn’t you, Paul?
Paul: Like a baby. Bawled like a little baby. [laughter]

Letterman: It’s true. It was the ugly crying too, not just a little tear on the cheek, you know?

Sherlock: Well, I apologize for the ugly crying. One likes one’s crying to be elegant and graceful.

Letterman: Mine never is. I cry like a teen girl for that Justin Bieber fella. [laughter] But it is a fantastic movie. It’s a really personal story, you know?

Sherlock: It is, and it’s a universal story, a human story. One of the things that interested me in the project was that Molly Hooper, our screenwriter, had written a story about a gay couple that wasn’t about being gay. It’s a story that could be about anyone. There is no distinction, we’re all people who love and grieve and suffer and struggle, and it doesn’t matter if we’re gay or straight or somewhere in-between.

[applause]

Letterman: But making the film turned into quite a personal experience for you.

Sherlock: [sighing] You’re just going to keep bringing it round, aren’t you?

Letterman: I’m a nosy talk show host, that’s my job.

[laughter]

Sherlock: So it is.

Letterman: So how’d you get involved with the film?

Sherlock: My agent asked me to take a look at this script because the screenwriter had written it with me in mind.

Letterman: Really?

Sherlock: Yes, that was very flattering. I read the script and I thought it was brilliant. I told him I’d do whatever I had to do to be in this film. The fact that it was about a gay couple was incidental, by the way. That had no personal relevance for me. Not then, anyway.

Letterman: So you weren’t—I mean, before this film.

Sherlock: That’s hard to say. I’d only ever dated women. But if you want the full truth, I’d never really met anyone who I was strongly drawn to, woman or man.

Letterman: Then you and John got to be friends during the film?

Sherlock: Yes. It was all very unexpected. I’m not exactly known for being quick to make friends.

Letterman: That’s the second time you said something like that about yourself. I gotta say, you seem like an okay guy to me.

[applause]

Sherlock: Well, thank you. Perhaps I’ve mellowed. I think it’s fair to say that John has been a good influence on me.

Letterman: He’s really excellent in this film.
Sherlock: Yes, he is. It was an honor to share a screen with him.

Letterman: It’s something different for him, isn’t it? No offense to him.

Sherlock: Oh, he’d be the first to agree. He’s known for other sorts of films. I admit that when we started shooting, I didn’t know what to expect from him. It’s such demanding material. But then when I realized how good he really is, and what he’s able to do—honestly, I can’t wait. I can’t wait for the rest of the world to see. There are going to be a lot of people who doubted him eating their words.

Letterman: We’ve got to take a break now, but we’ll be back with more with Sherlock Holmes.

[applause, commercial break]

Letterman: Welcome back, we’re here chatting with Sherlock Holmes; his new film, To a Stranger, opens next Friday. Now, Sherlock, we gotta talk about this big news of yours.

Sherlock: I know; it’s all right. I’m ready.

Letterman: This is your first time speaking publicly since this news broke.

Sherlock: Yes, it is.

Letterman: You gotta know that it was a big shock to a lot of people.

Sherlock: I think that’s an understatement. I know everyone’s probably seen the video of me going a bit mental at that Variety screening.

Letterman: You didn’t seem mental to me. More like you’d just had it, you know?

Sherlock: Well, I had, I suppose. Having to hide like that does something unpleasant to you. And it had only been a few months for us. But this wasn’t the plan.

Letterman: You mean, for it to come out now.

Sherlock: John and I always meant to go public. We knew we couldn’t hide forever, but we had decided to wait until next spring, at least. I just couldn’t do it anymore.

Letterman: John’s been on the show half a dozen times over the years.

Sherlock: Yes, he says hello. He also said to tell you that if you’re too mean to me he’ll only go on Leno from now on.

[laughter]

Letterman: Well, that’d be just as much a punishment for him as for us.

[more laughter; Sherlock smirks a bit]

Letterman: Is he here? Did he come with you?

Sherlock: No, he’s at home. He’s got appearances of his own to do. The run-up to a film’s release is a very busy time.

Letterman: So getting back to me being nosy about your personal life…. [laughter] But it’s not just me, you know, everybody’s dying of curiosity.
Sherlock: I know. Really, it’s a very ordinary, boring story of the sort that happens every day. People meet at work, they get to know each other, they fall in love, and all the rest of it.

Letterman: Well sure, it’s boring when you put it like that. [laughter] When you make it sound like just another day at the office!

Sherlock: It isn’t boring to me, of course. I’m the one living it. But there’s nothing extraordinary about how we met.

Letterman: So, you became friends while you were making the film.

Sherlock: Yes, close friends. That was all there was to it until a few months ago, last September. I’d been in a play in London, and I hadn’t seen John all summer. He showed up at the closing night of my show, and…well, there you have it.

Letterman: Was it a big dramatic moment?

Sherlock: Actually, it was. What can I tell you, we’re actors. We do love our dramatic moments.

[laughter]

Letterman: So things are all good with you now?

Sherlock: Yes, very good. I find that I’m rather stupidly happy.


Sherlock: I keep thinking that this can’t possibly be my life, and someone will come along and tell me there’s been some awful bureaucratic error, and someone else’s happiness got assigned to me by mistake, and take it all away.

Letterman: Oh, I don’t think that would happen. You know those bureaucratic errors never get fixed.

[laughter]

Sherlock: Then I’ll just trundle along and hope no one notices.

Letterman: Well, all our best. John’s a good guy.

Sherlock: He is, he’s fantastic. I’m afraid I’m quite besotted.

[scattered ‘awwww’s from the audience]

Letterman: You brought a clip for us, yes?

Sherlock: Yes, indeed.

Letterman: Can you tell us what’s happening here?

Sherlock: John’s character, Mark, has just learned something unpleasant about Benjamin and they’re having a bit of a row.

[the clip plays. It’s quite dramatic: Mark is coolly furious while Benjamin is flustered and caught off-guard. The audience applauds when it’s over.]

Letterman: It really is a fantastic film. It’s gotta win a bunch of Oscars. I’d recommend it to anybody.
Sherlock: Thank you. We hope it’ll be very successful. What I hope most of all is that people can put aside all this drama about John and me and focus on the film itself. The film is important; it’s got something to say. We’re just a couple of British chaps shacking up. Not terribly interesting.

[laughter]

Letterman: Gee, I don’t know. Might get some argument on that. [laughter] I’m just a guy behind a desk, what do I know. But I think people are interested.

Sherlock: Unfortunately, you’re probably right.

Letterman: Anyway, the film is *To a Stranger*, it opens next Friday, December 2nd. Sherlock Holmes, everybody!

[mad applause and cheers]
John: Intentionally and unintentionally, yes, quite busy.

Ellen: So, I guess…welcome to the club!

[John laughs, as does the audience; they burst into applause and cheers again]

John: Um, thank you.

Ellen: Did you get your membership card and welcome basket? Someone should have been by with that stuff by now.

John: Oh no, actually, we’re not out of the thirty-day probation.

Ellen: Oh, that’s right. Mandatory waiting period. Too many people were coming over just for the welcome basket. [laughter] I hear there’s some really good chocolate in it.

John: Really? Cor, I’ll look forward to that.

Ellen: I feel like I ought to say congratulations, too, because, well…

[A very artistic, editorial picture of Sherlock looking particularly gorgeous appears on the big screens behind Ellen and John. The audience cheers and whistles and whoops. John turns bright red and laughs, but he is not looking away. The audience calms down, but John is still looking. Ellen looks at him, to the audience, and back at him. Laughter.]

Ellen: John?

John: [jumps a little] Sorry, I went somewhere else for a moment. [laughter] Yeah, that’s…that’s a good one.

Ellen: He’s a looker.

John: But honestly, these photographers. They always shoot him all serious and brooding. I wish they’d ask him to smile now and again. He’s got such a lovely smile.

[scattered ‘awww’s from the audience]

John: I sound quite smitten, don’t I?

Ellen: Aren’t you?

John: I suppose so.

Ellen: Did you see him on Letterman?

John: I did, yes, of course.

Ellen: He sounded rather smitten himself, take a look.

John: Oh, God.

[Ellen’s monitors click over to Sherlock’s appearance on Letterman the night before]

Letterman: So things are all good with you now?

Sherlock: Yes, very good. I find that I’m rather stupidly happy.

Sherlock: I keep thinking that this can’t possibly be my life, and someone will come along and tell me there’s been some awful bureaucratic error, and someone else’s happiness got assigned to me by mistake, and take it all away.

Letterman: Oh, I don’t think that would happen. You know those bureaucratic errors never get fixed.

[laughter]

Sherlock: Then I’ll just trundle along and hope no one notices.

Letterman: Well, all our best. John’s a good guy.

Sherlock: He is, he’s fantastic. I’m afraid I’m quite besotted.

[the clips ends. John looks a little overwhelmed.]

Ellen: See, there now.

John: I admit I was a bit stunned to hear him talk like that. But, um…’stupidly happy’ is a fairly apt description.

[the audience awww’s a bit more and applauds.]

Ellen: Unfortunately, that’s not the whole story.

John: No, it isn’t.

Ellen: How are you coping? I’ve been through this and I wasn’t nearly as famous when I came out as you and Sherlock are, I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you since last weekend.

John: It’s been crazy, it really has. We’re lucky, we have a really fantastic manager and publicist who’s helping us stay sane, and who’s sort of standing between us and the giant tsunami of everyone who wants to make sure we know that they hate us or love us or whatever else they want to express.

Ellen: How’s it been, hate-versus-love wise?

John: You know, it’s hard to say right now. There’s the usual segment of people burning our DVDs and shrieking that we’re going to hell, but that was always going to happen. In terms of the rest of everyone, nobody seems to know what to think.

Ellen: Well, this has never happened before. Nobody as famous as the two of you has ever come out, and definitely not as a couple. I mean, he’s an Oscar winner; you’ve been in three of the top ten grossing romantic comedies of all time.

John: [nodding] Yes. That’s what we kept talking about before all this happened. The fact is that there are a lot of people in the closet in Hollywood. The unfortunate truth is that there are legitimate reasons for them to stay there. The fear of coming out is not unfounded. People’s careers have just ended.

Ellen: Mine did. But I was a comedian and I had a sitcom. I wasn’t at your level.

John: There are other actors who are out and still have careers.
Ellen: But nobody who was a big-time leading man like both of you are.

John: I don’t know how this is all going to shake out in the end. Perhaps neither of us will be able to keep being leading men.

Ellen: I think you will.

[applause and cheers]

John: Thanks, but either the audiences will come see us in films after this, or they won’t. Either they’ll accept us in dramatic and romantic roles, or they won’t. Our team has been very supportive, but a lot of people are telling us that we’ve just committed professional suicide.

Ellen: You and Sherlock released a statement, but it was pretty bare-bones. This is the first time you’ve spoken publicly about your relationship.

John: Right.

Ellen: Everyone has to be asking what happened, though. Watching Sherlock in that clip from the screening, it’s heart wrenching. He sounds like he’s at the end of his rope, like he just can’t take it for one more minute.

John: Yes, he was at the end of his rope. I’m still struggling with that, because I didn’t know. He didn’t let me see how much it was bothering him. We had a plan to wait, and he went along with it for my sake. He wanted to go public from the start.

Ellen: Why did you want to wait?

John: [hesitated] This film is very important, not just because it’s a fantastic film with something to say, but also because of what it could do for both of our careers. We’re both coming off some lean years and some disappointing films. Sherlock’s got a lot of respect to fall back on, but for me, this is a chance to really reinvent who I am as an actor. Getting this part was an opportunity of the kind I never thought I’d get. I want the film to be judged on its own merits, and to have the chance for it to help me make some positive changes in my career. [he shakes his head] But when it came down to it and I finally saw what it was doing to him, I just couldn’t. My career is not more important to me than he is. Nothing is more important to me than he is. [John looks away for a moment. He clears his throat and blinks back tears] Sorry.

Ellen: No, it’s okay. It’s really tough, hiding who you are. I did it for years, and Portia did it too. I know there a lot of people who are still hiding.

John: In a way I don’t feel like I’ve earned the right to talk about this. I was never in the closet. I never had a relationship with a man before I met Sherlock and neither had he. We had only been keeping our secret for a few short months.

Ellen: I don’t think there’s a minimum amount of time you have to be in the closet for it to start doing bad things to your head.

John: No. No, there isn’t.

Ellen: We have to take a break now. When we come back, we’ll talk more with John Watson.

[applause; commercial break]

Ellen: And we’re back with John Watson, star of the amazing film To a Stranger which opens next
week and which we’ll talk about later, but who’s been making headlines these last few days since the news broke about that he’s in a relationship with his co-star, Sherlock Holmes. Is that how we’re phrasing it, John?

John: That’ll do.

Ellen: I only ask because on Letterman, Sherlock said you were “shacking up”.

[laughter]

John: [also laughing] I know. I can’t leave him alone for one day, can I?

[more laughter]

Ellen: I definitely want to talk about this movie, but can we talk first about how all this happened? You haven’t said much about that yet.

John: I’d never met Sherlock before my screen test with him last winter. I knew of him, of course. I’d seen his films. I was a little intimidated, honestly.

Ellen: He’s intimidating.

John: He can be, yeah. I’m the sort of chap who likes to get along with people, but he’s more about the work. He’s not out to be Mr. Congeniality. He made that pretty clear. I knew that he had his doubts about my being cast in this role. A lot of people did. To be fair, there isn’t much in my past work to make people think I could handle a part like this. I knew I could do it and I was eager to prove it. I might have been a bit defensive. So we didn’t exactly hit it off immediately.

Ellen: How’d you end up friends?

John: We had a bit of a row, actually. But out of it came the fact that he wanted to make this film great, and he’d come to respect me as an actor, so we started cooperating more. We got to be close mates after that.

Ellen: And that’s all it was?

John: At the time, yes. After the shoot I came back here and he went off to London to do a play.

Ellen: When did things change between you?

John: [thinks for a moment] They had already changed, actually. When we said goodbye at the end of the shoot, I already knew that something was there. But things get a bit emotional during filming sometimes, and I didn’t know if it was just getting caught up in the moment or what, so neither of us said anything. I had a rough summer, and I know now that he did, too. We weren’t in touch and it was awful. Finally I said to hell with this, I flew to London the night his play closed.

Ellen: That’s like something out of one of your movies. [laughter] No, it really is! Flying off to surprise someone and make a dramatic confession.

John: I suppose it is, yeah.

Ellen: Had you struggled with your sexuality in the past?

John: This may sound strange, but I hadn’t ever really given it much thought. A lot of people experiment, I’m no different in that regard, but the question never really came up. I dated women, none of them terribly seriously. I was attracted to them, but I was never able to make a real
connection. I never expected to have anything like this with Sherlock. I hoped we’d get along well, I thought we might be friends, but I couldn’t have predicted this.

Ellen: But you were open to it when it happened.

John: Yes. I guess that says something, right there. But how could I not be? How could I ignore what I was feeling, and what he was feeling, just because he – well, he came in a differently shaped tin than I was used to?

[laughter]

Ellen: Especially when the tin looks like this.

[another image flashes up on the big screens from a different photoshoot of Sherlock looking dashing and handsome; audience whistles and cheers]

John: [laughing] Stop doing that!

Ellen: So, this all comes out, and then what? Pandemonium?

John: More or less.

Ellen: It must be pretty overwhelming.

John: Very much so.

Ellen: You guys have been on every news site and every magazine.

[as she speaks, magazine covers flash on her big screens behind her. People’s cover shows each of them at different red-carpet events with a large headline reading “Sherlock and John In Love.” More gossip mag covers along similar lines appear. The cover of Time shows one of the unused photos from the EW photoshoot, their faces side by side on a dark background, with a single word headline in massive point size: “OUT.”]

John: Yes, we have. I wish this weren’t considered so newsworthy. It shouldn’t be, no more than any other couple going public.

Ellen: But the question everyone’s asking is, what happened while you two were offstage?

John: Yes, everyone is indeed asking about that. [smiles]

Ellen: Oh, I see. Not going to tell us, are you?

John: Did you really think I would?

Ellen: No, but I’m contractually obligated to ask just in case. [laughter]

John: Without going into too much detail, let’s just say we talked about what had just happened, and why, and decided what was going to happen next.

Ellen: All right, fair enough. We need to take another break, when we come back we’re going to talk about this film. We’ll be right back with John Watson, everyone.

[applause; commercial break]

Ellen: We’re back with John Watson, whose new film, To a Stranger, opens on Friday. Now, John,
I saw this film the other night. I have to say—and I am not just saying this because you’re sitting here—it was one of the best films I’ve seen in years.

John: Thank you so much.

Ellen: And there’s nothing about it that screams “big-time film,” you know? It’s essentially a small story about two people.

John: That’s one of the reasons I think it’s so successful. It is a small story, the kind of story that happens every day to ordinary people, and our characters in the film are just that. They’re ordinary men who go through something together.

Ellen: And the fact that they’re gay isn’t the whole point of the story.

John: No, it isn’t. There is a lot of value in films that portray the things that are unique to gay life. The difficulty of coming out, of dealing with homophobia, of facing the risk of AIDS, of family rejection and society’s intolerance. But at the same time, gay people aren’t defined by being gay. Gay people also have work stress. They have money troubles. They have sick family members and conflicts with friends and relationship stress and landlords who are jerks. I think there’s also value in a film that shows two gay men who are navigating those kinds of problems, the sort that anyone has, gay or straight.

Ellen: I’ve read that you shot the film mostly in sequence, is that right?

John: Yes, that’s right.

Ellen: Did that make a big difference?

John: I think it did. Ang chose to shoot the film in sequence so that Sherlock and I would be getting to know each other just as our characters were.

Ellen: I know you’re probably already sick of being asked about this, but…

John: Yes, the sex scenes, I know.

Ellen: I read that they were originally much more explicit.

John: Let’s just say that we shot a lot more than ended up in the film. That isn’t unusual. I think that the scene we shot ended up being somewhat out of step with the rest of the film, so it was trimmed.

Ellen: It’s still pretty racy.

John: It’s frank. It’s realistic. I don’t think it’s any more than we’ve seen a hundred times in scenes featuring a man and a woman.

Ellen: Was it strange for you?

John: Well, I’ve shot what feels like a hundred kissing scenes. Not quite as many bedroom scenes, but my fair share. Sherlock has done more on-camera bedroom work than I have. By the time we got to that day, we were pretty comfortable with each other, and we’d built up some trust. It really wasn’t any different than shooting a similar scene with a woman. You’ve got to be in it together, and know that it’s just as awkward for your co-star, and you have to trust each other and be there for each other if you’re going to be able to really let go and perform the scene the way it needs to be.

Ellen: Did you bring a clip to show us?
John: Yes, indeed, I did.

Ellen: What scene is this?

John: It’s Benjamin and Mark’s first kiss, actually. I’m on the phone in the park and talking to Benjamin, and well…you’ll see.

Ellen: Okay, let’s take a look. To a Stranger.

[the clip plays. John is onscreen for most of it, as Mark listens to Benjamin and they discuss the change in their relationship. At the end of the clip, Benjamin appears and they kiss. The audience applauds at the end of the clip.]

Ellen: Congratulations on this film, seriously. I urge everyone to go see it, it’s fantastic.

John: Thanks so much. We’re proud of it.

Ellen: Now, it’s not a secret that there a lot of gay actors and actresses in Hollywood who are afraid of coming out because of what it’ll do with their careers. Are you afraid for your career?

John: Of course. I don’t know if I’ll still have one.

Ellen: Why do you think it’s been so difficult for people to keep their careers after coming out?

John: Well, I think studios fear that audiences won’t accept me in a role where I have to kiss a woman, for example. Which is a legitimate fear. Now, straight actors have played gay men before, and that didn’t seem to be a problem. And no one seems to worry that an audience won’t accept, for example, Angelina Jolie kissing Clive Owen when they all know that in real life she’s with someone else. An actor is not their character. To me, this is the same. But it’s not the same to a lot of people. At least, that’s what the business is afraid of.

Ellen: There are plenty of roles where you wouldn’t have to kiss anybody, though.

John: Maybe. But studios are very afraid of risk, and this is just one more element of risk that’s now attached to me.

Ellen: What would you do if your career was over? Have you thought about it?

John: Yes, of course I have. Sherlock and I have talked about that a lot. I’d hope that it wouldn’t get so bad that I’d be down to taking my juggling act on the road to the local Rotary Club.

Ellen: Oh, you juggle?

John: No, not really.

Ellen: So I’m guessing that the act isn’t so great.

[laughter]

John: [laughing] It’s pretty terrible. To be serious about it, if Sherlock and I found that Hollywood was no longer a good place for us, we’d probably go back to London. The British film and television industry is much more accepting. So many beloved British film, theater and television icons are gay. Stephen Fry, for example—he’s practically the patron saint of the British entertainment industry. It might be easier for us to earn our keep there. All I really want is to be able to support myself and my family by doing the work that I love, and to be with Sherlock.
Ellen: We’ve got to take a break, when we come back, John will take audience questions.

[applause; commercial break]

Ellen: We’re back with John Watson, star of many beloved movies and the upcoming drama *To a Stranger*, one of the best films I’ve seen in a long time. Today we’re talking with John not just about his new film but about his relationship with his co-star, Sherlock Holmes. They’ve pretty much made history by acknowledging in public. Now we’re going throw it out to you guys for your questions.

[the microphone is passed to a young woman]

Guest #1: Hi John, my name is Lisa.

John: Hello, Lisa.

Lisa: [giggles a bit] I have to tell you, you’re one of my favorite actors. *Rewind* is one of my best comfort movies. Did you know when you made it that it was going to be such a big hit? Are you still in touch with Rachel Weisz?

John: Thanks for the kind words, first of all. And of course, we always hope that every film we make is going to be a big hit. I have to admit, I had a good feeling about *Rewind* when we were making it. I got on quite well with everyone in the film, especially Rachel, we had a really good time during the shoot, and everything seemed to click. It’s a fun, romantic story. I’d never really done a film of that genre, and it turned out it fit me rather well. So well that I did almost nothing else until—uh, now. [laughter] I am in touch with Rachel, actually, we’ve kept in pretty close contact. I don’t get to see her as often as I’d like, but we do speak on the phone every couple of months.

[the microphone is passed to a middle-aged woman]

Guest #2: Hello Mr. Watson, my name is Debbie.

John: Hi, Debbie.

Debbie: I just want to say I wish you the best, and I’m sorry it has to be so hard for you just because of who you’re with. [applause]

John: Thank you. I’m sorry, too.

Debbie: I know there have been a lot of mean things said by radio hosts and people on TV. Have you had anyone confront you directly?

John: Unfortunately, yes, I have. Not as many as I feared. Most people won’t approach me and come right out with it, it’s more that I can see them giving me the side-eye, you know? Or a dirty look, or talking behind their hand. That’s not so bad, at least I can ignore it. I have had a couple of people call me rude names, and one woman came right up and wanted to know how I dared show my face in public.

[distressed murmurs from audience]

Ellen: What did you say?

John: I told her she was under no obligation to look at me.

[laughter, smattering of applause – the microphone is passed to a new guest]

Guest #3: There’s been a lot of Oscar talk around *To a Stranger* already, a lot of it about your
performance. What do you think about that?

John: I think I better not say anything, it’s bad luck. [laughter] No, seriously, there has been some Oscar buzz for the film, which is very gratifying. If I were to be nominated… [he shakes his head] I’d hardly ever dared to imagine that such a thing would ever happen to me. I think Sherlock definitely deserves a nomination, as does our screenwriter, our fantastic director, and I hope that the film itself will be recognized. I won’t deny that it might be nice to have a matched set of his-and-his Oscars on our mantelpiece. [laughter] I’m not predicting anything, but one does have fantasies about such things.

[the microphone goes to a fourth guest, a twentysomething woman, who seems nervous]

Guest #4: Um…hi, Mr. Watson. I’m Cheryl.

John: Hi, Cheryl! You can call me John, by the way.

Cheryl: Okay, John, I…um, I’m sorry, but I just have the biggest crush on Sherlock.

[laughter and applause]

John: [laughing along] That’s okay. Me, too! [more laughter]

Cheryl: He hardly ever goes on talk shows like this. So this is my big chance to find out what he’s really like.

John: Oh, gosh. Well, you’re right, he’s not much for talk shows. He thinks he’s crap at them, although I thought he did very well on Letterman. [applause] What’s he like? [he pauses, thinking. He takes a breath, opens his mouth, then nothing comes out. Laughter.] He’s brilliant, but he can’t cook. If I didn’t make him eat, he’d live on tea and chocolate biscuits. He’s not much for sport, but he’s very competitive. He is very uncomfortable with kids, but they adore him because he talks to them like they’re adults. He has a very dry sense of humor. He can be arrogant, but he isn’t proud. He doesn’t discriminate, he treats everyone the same. [everyone is quiet; John has gone a bit serious] I have absolutely no idea how we ended up together, but he changed my life when I was looking the other way.

Ellen: You’re very forthright about this.

John: Maybe I’m trying to make amends. [he hesitates] I was the one who wanted us to keep it quiet, until a more convenient time. [he shakes his head, like he can’t believe it himself.] Convenient. I let Sherlock think that his feelings, that our relationship, was less important than the PR around a film. It might have been the right decision logically, but emotionally it was all wrong. That’s what this business can do to you. Sometimes I think we’re all emotional cripples. That’s not a gay or a straight thing, it’s a public-figure thing. We talk about our partners like we’re recommending them for a job, have you ever noticed that?

Ellen: I have, actually.

John: What is that? Why do we talk around it? In our statements and in interviews like this, we say things like “she’s a fantastic person” or “we’re getting along great” or my personal favorite, “we look forward to this new stage of our lives.” Why do we throw euphemisms at our relationships? It's like we’re afraid for the rest of the world to find out that we have real feelings—that we get sad and scared and excited and depressed and euphoric, that we fall in love, too. I decided before I came on today that I wasn’t going to do that. I love Sherlock. I’m not going to soft-pedal it because someone, somewhere might be uncomfortable. I’m not ashamed. I’m proud.
Ellen: [looks a little choked up] I gotta say—I’m pretty proud to be sitting here next to you, John. [she reaches out for his hand; he grasps hers and squeezes it.]

John: Thanks. I’m glad to have this opportunity to lay my cards on the table. I couldn’t ask for a better place to do it than on your show, Ellen.

Ellen: I would have loved to have you both on the show together.

John: That could have been interesting, yes.

Ellen: Maybe some other time, when you’re not promoting a film.

John: I’d enjoy that. I can’t speak for Sherlock.

Ellen: Let’s call him and ask!

[cheers and applause]

John: [laughing] You want to just ring him up?

Ellen: Sure, why not? What’s he doing right now?

John: I’ve no idea. What time is it?

Ellen: [to the stage manager] Do we have his phone number? Yeah, let’s give him a call. John, would you like to do the honors?

John: No, this is all you.

[a photo of Sherlock appears on the smaller screen between their chairs]

Ellen: Okay, and we’re…are we? Yeah, we are. Calling Sherlock Holmes. See if he’d like to come on the show.

[the phone rings and rings]

Ellen: Uh-oh. He isn’t picking up. We might be getting kicked to voicemail, folks.

[the phone stops ringing and goes to voicemail]

Sherlock: [sounding very put out] You’ve reached Sherlock Holmes. If you don’t know what to do next, I weep for the gene pool and your presence in it. Try not to ramble, include any and all relevant information, and for God’s sake don’t be tiresome about it. [the tone]

[audience laughs; John is rolling his eyes a little bit]

Ellen: Hey, Sherlock, it’s Ellen DeGeneres. We’re taping my show and I’m sitting here with your charming fella, we’ve been having a good chat. We were just talking about the possibility of getting you on the show as well, the both of you at once. John’s been telling us some hilarious stories about you, haven’t you, John?

John: Oh, hilarious, yes.

Ellen: I think my studio audience might like to say hi. Everyone, say hi to Sherlock, on one, two
Entire audience: HI, SHERLOCK!

Ellen: See, they’d want you to come on the show, too. We’re all big fans of yours around here. Talk to you soon! [she hangs up]

[cheers and applause]

John: [shaking his head] You are going to get me in so much trouble.

Ellen: I’m good at that.

John: Because that’s what I need in my life right now, is a little more upheaval.

Ellen: I was afraid you might be getting bored. You know, I like to mix it up.


Ellen: Well, John, I’m really bummed about it but we are out of time. [audience makes disappointed noises] But it has been truly amazing having you here.

John: It’s been great to be here, Ellen. Thanks for having me on.

Ellen: I have to say again, congratulations on this film, it is really extraordinary and I expect whole heaps of Oscar nominations.

John: I just hope it does well so that somebody hires me again.

Ellen: I’m sure that it will. And let me say that I know that you didn’t do what you did to make a political statement, but you’re an inspiration to a lot of people. I’m a little in awe of you right now.

John: I’m just a guy trying to have a normal relationship.

Ellen: Good luck with that, then.

[laughter]

John: Yeah, I think I might need it.

Ellen: John Watson, everybody!

[mad applause and cheers]
Dear HFN and WWO Members:

We know some of you have been wondering about the Big Announcement that we’ve been hinting at. To those of you who’ve been helping us implement the big change, thanks for keeping the secret! We didn’t want to let the cat out of the bag until we were ready.

We are super excited to announce that starting Monday, HFN and WWO will be merging! It’s been something we’ve considered for awhile, since our two sites started sharing so much content and working together over the summer, and now that our fantastic guys have confirmed what so many of us already suspected, it just seemed like the right time!

These URLs will continue to function, but all visitors will now be redirected to our new, jointly-run site:

www.holmesandwatson.net

Rest assured that John and Sherlock will each still have their own forums on the site, but there will also now be a joint forum. We will be sharing server space and web space and combining our image and video archives for easy browsing. All your usernames and passwords will continue to function on the new site. If you’re registered on both sites with two different usernames or passwords, you’ll be asked to pick one for the new joint site.

We know that our two sites will be just as happy together as John and Sherlock are. We will continue to support them in their individual careers and in their life together, and hopefully in lots of future projects together as well!

See you on the new site!

Love and kisses,
Megan, Webmistress of HFN
Shirley, Webmistress of WWO

[posted to Just Jared]

Spotted Tuesday morning at LAX was Sherlock Holmes, hiding behind dark glasses and trailed by a crapload of photographers. Can’t blame the guy—the media scrutiny on him’s been relentless. No sign of boyfriend John Watson—looks like Holmes is flying solo. He’s scheduled to appear on David Letterman’s show Tuesday night, so he’s probably on his way to the taping. Holmes and Watson have not been seen in public together since they outed themselves as a couple last Friday. Must be testing the waters.
The fact remains that no one can predict how this is all going to shake out for either of these two men. It’s an open secret in Hollywood that many top-tier performers are gay, but no one has ever wanted to go first. It is ironic that these two actors, who are both in their first same-sex relationship, should be the ones who break through the rainbow ceiling and see what the view looks like. Will this be a nine-days’-wonder that only serves to further showcase the hypocrisy of the business?

Everyone’s rushing to pat them on the head and shake their hands, to commend their courage, while behind their backs directors withdraw casting offers, producers cross their names off to-hire lists, and roles dry up. I spoke to one producer who would not be quoted by name, but who stated in no uncertain terms that his studio would be extremely hesitant to cast either of them again, regardless of the role.

Everyone loves you to your face in Hollywood. But in the end, they only love the money you can bring in.

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Sabine432: These men are role models to children! I am truly disgusted that they would expose their deviance so publicly. John Watson especially has been in many family-friendly films, but how can any Christian family watch them now? Knowing that he is a homosexual? The Bible speaks out against these deviances and we need to cut the poison from the fabric of this immoral society, beginning with these Hollywood types who sleep around and lie men with men and think it makes them heroic.

AstroBoy2397: Sabine, I guess you skipped over those parts of the Bible where it says that God loves all of us just as we are, and He made us all in his image, including people who are gay. God doesn’t make mistakes. John and Sherlock are being honest and truthful. I guess you don’t care about THOSE family values. Just the ones that would make everybody like you.

GeorgeRTL: I couldn’t care less if they’re gay, but do they have to shove it in everyone’s face? Can’t they be gay for each other in private and leave their business in their own house?

JillianMo: I guess for some people, “shoving it in everyone’s face” means existing. John and Sherlock have done nothing different than any other two people in a relationship. They’ve been photographed once, holding hands and looking happy. Why should they have to act any differently than a straight couple, or hide away inside their house?

[“Body Language” feature in US Weekly]

We’ve asked our resident body-language expert, Marilyn Roos, to analyze the most talked-about photo of the week, featuring newly-out couple John Watson and Sherlock Holmes leaving a Los Angeles eatery shortly after their unexpected revelation at a Variety screening.

“They’re standing quite close together,” Roos says. “Closer than they need to, which indicates that they enjoy being in each other’s company. Their fingers are intertwined, which is a more intimate way to hold hands. Notice the way John’s shoulders are squared and back; he may be self-conscious about his height compared to Sherlock’s. They’re maintaining eye contact and their smiles are genuine. Their body language is that of two people who are very much in love.”
PhillyGuy Am I the only one who kinda resents it that these two guys are suddenly the Face of Gay Liberation? Who the fuck are they, anyway? How can they come out of the closet, they were never IN the closet! It's a slap in the face to those of us who spent our entire lives dealing with intolerance and bigotry and being tormented and bullied and called faggot and queer and all the rest of it. They spent their whole lives enjoying their straight privilege, then suddenly discovered the wonders of sucking cock and in like two minutes they're being held up as the new heroes of the gay community? Not my heroes, thanks.

ArminHammer PhillyGuy, wtf? Now you have to EARN gay cred or something, like it's goddamned merit badges? You get one for being called a buttpirate and another one for getting ex-gay literature left in your mailbox? Bullshit. Getting bullied sucks balls but it doesn't make you MORE GAY than someone who never had to go through that. There's no minimum closet-time requirement. I don't give a shit how long J and S were gay, or if they were gay at all, or even if they're gay NOW [Mod Note: go over to the “J&S – Gay or Bi?” thread to debate that one, it's been ruled off-topic here]. They came out as a couple, which means they fucking SIGNED UP for all the crap that they're gonna get for it from here on in. They accepted it, and accepted that it might end their careers, and said “Bring it on, because we’re in love and we’re not going to hide.” That’s what makes them heroes to me, not whether or not they ever had to hide their Playgirls when they were sixteen.

John had been a little surprised by how much he missed Sherlock; he hadn’t thought that a separation of barely three days would be so difficult, although he had been far from idle. He’d taped his appearance on the Ellen show, which would air on Monday. Ellen had been funny and supportive, and the audience had been receptive. He’d left the studio feeling more optimistic about his own future than he had in quite some time—a feeling that had lasted a grand total of twenty-five minutes until he’d gotten home and switched on the news, only to see a debate program on CNN featuring some pundit or another claiming that his relationship with Sherlock was a devastating strike against the traditional position of the gay community that people were born gay. How could such a claim be made now, the pundit had demanded, when two previously-straight men could ‘go gay’ for each other so quickly? The gay-rights activist on the other side of the debate had effectively countered the argument, saying that the ability to love either gender was no less an inborn trait than straight or gay, but the very fact that John and Sherlock’s relationship was being used as a weapon against gay rights was profoundly disheartening. There was already a small but not-insignificant faction within the gay community that resented him and Sherlock being elevated to gay-icon status, feeling that they had not paid their dues, nor earned the right to be such visible symbols of gay pride.

He glanced at his watch again, sighing with impatience. He was pondering popping in a Hitchcock film to distract himself when his mobile went off. He grinned at the text message; it was the automated alert from the gates to his neighborhood that someone had just used the access code to enter. Sherlock would be here in five minutes. He got up and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on for tea.

The garage door opened and John heard Sherlock’s car pull into the garage. The back door opened, he heard the thump of Sherlock’s suitcase as he dragged it over the threshold, and then there he was. John’s stomach did a little cartwheel; three days was apparently enough time for him to be freshly affected by Sherlock’s unique beauty.

Sherlock beamed a wide, genuine smile when he saw him. “John,” he said, dropping his briefcase.

John met him halfway and they embraced. “Welcome home,” he said.
“It’s good to be home. It’s been a long day.” Sherlock drew back and kissed him, first quickly, then with more intent, his tongue slipping between John’s lips as they pulled tight against each other. John ran his hand up into Sherlock’s soft curls and rose up on his toes to kiss him harder. He kissed Sherlock’s cheek and his jawline, then hugged him again, pressing his face into Sherlock’s neck.

“I missed you,” he said.

Sherlock held him tight. “I missed you as well, my love,” he murmured. John smiled at the endearment. It slipped easily from Sherlock’s lips, as if he’d said it many times, when, in fact, this was the first.

He pulled back and squeezed Sherlock’s arms. “You want some tea?”

“Yes, thanks.” Sherlock took off his jacket and tossed it over the back of a chair.

“You should eat something.”

“I’m fine.”

“Sherlock, if you’ve consumed any food since breakfast, I’ll eat my hat.” Sherlock just stood there, looking guilty. “I thought so. I made a batch of that soup you like.”

Sherlock perked up a bit. “With the little meatballs?”

“Yes. Go sit down.”

“Are you mothering me, John?”

“No. I’m taking care of you, because that’s what one does for one’s partner.” He steered Sherlock over to the kitchen table and sat him down.

Sherlock looked up at him. “Oh, is that what one does? Why, then, is it always you taking care of me?”

“Because someone has to, as you’re absolute pants at it.”

Sherlock stared down at the mug that John set before him. “Shouldn’t I be bringing you tea as well?” he said, sounding puzzled. “Is this something that will fester within you until you explode with resentment?”

John sat down with a sigh. “You were reading Cosmo on the plane again, weren’t you?”

“Someone left one behind in the seat pocket.”

“Well, whatever Cosmo has to say about it, I don’t need you to make me tea. I like taking care of you, you tolerate being taken care of, so it’s all fine.”

Sherlock smiled, then drank his tea while John heated up a bowl of soup and brought it over to him. He could tell that Sherlock was not in a chatty mood, so he fetched his laptop from the den and settled at the table with his own tea to read some emails.

For several minutes they sat in silence, Sherlock quietly eating his soup in miniscule sips. John got distracted by a long email from his solicitor, but as he opened up the Reply window, he became aware that Sherlock hadn’t taken a bite in some time. He looked up to find Sherlock watching him, one eyebrow arched, like he was trying to suss him out. “What?”
“You…aren’t talking.”

“Do you want to talk?”

“No, not particularly.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Sherlock shifted in his chair and thought for a moment before speaking. “I have observed that people who fancy themselves in a relationship with me always wish to be talking. Most people find silence unnerving. And you yourself are fond of talking, as a rule.”

John crossed his legs and thought for a moment before he spoke. “You get a certain look when you don’t feel like talking, it’s an expression around the eyes that I can’t quite describe, but I know it when I see it. This typically happens after you’ve been around a lot of new people and had a lot of activity, and need time to let your brain stop…masticating.” Sherlock smiled at the word. “You’ve got that look now. I don’t have anything urgent to tell you. So we don’t need to talk.”

“John, you’re….” Sherlock began, looking at him as though he were the most amazing thing he’d ever seen. “I can’t help but fear that I am getting rather the better deal in this relationship.”

John snorted. “Really?”

“How can I not? I have a handsome, talented boyfriend who makes me delicious soup and brings me tea while being charming, considerate, and a fantastic shag.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” John said, “I sound like quite the catch.”

“Meanwhile, you are stuck with a stroppy, ill-tempered, arrogant wanker who can’t even keep a secret for four bleeding months.”

John leaned closer. “You are all those things, yes. But you are also a fascinating, passionate genius who not only helped me rediscover my love of acting but who went on national television and fearlessly told the world that you’re in love with me.”

Sherlock met his eyes. “I am in love with you.”

“Likewise.” John winked. “And you’re a pretty fantastic shag, yourself.”

Sherlock didn’t smile at that. “This is still new to me. I….,” He cleared his throat and fidgeted in his chair. “I wish to be a good partner to you.”

“If you weren’t, you’d know it. I’m not shy.” He leaned forward and kissed him, drawing it out. “Let’s go upstairs and I’ll take care of you some more,” he whispered against Sherlock’s lips.

“God, yes,” Sherlock murmured, cupping John’s face in his hands and diving into his mouth. John let himself be thoroughly kissed for a few moments, feeling how much Sherlock had missed him in the greedy urgency of his mouth. He got up, took Sherlock by the hand, and led him up the stairs to their bedroom.

John hadn’t said as much to Ellen, but her questions about his sexuality were a little more complicated than he’d let on. He still wasn’t sure any one label fit him, but it had to mean something that it was so electrifying to share his bed and his body with another man—a man with similar urges and appetites to his own. Such thoughts were his own to keep; he couldn’t exactly go on national television and tell the world he’d discovered that he really liked cock.
Tonight, he wanted to be in charge. He wanted his very own Sherlock-shaped plaything to toss around the bed and pleasure and take pleasure from. Sherlock’s mood, a little wrung-out and passive, was perfectly suited to John’s plans. He stripped him and went to work on him, using his mouth and his hands until Sherlock was practically melting into the bed. By the time he straddled Sherlock’s waist and sank down on his hard cock, they were both damp with sweat and heavy-breathed with arousal. Sherlock pressed his head back into the bed, arching his neck as his hands came up to seize John’s hips. “God, John,” he groaned. “You feel gorgeous.”

John smiled down at him, moving his hips across Sherlock’s groin, gasping as his cock grazed that spot inside him. “Three days felt like forever,” John muttered, grinding himself down on his lover.

Sherlock slid his hands up John’s chest and pulled him down to kiss him, his hips starting to move beneath John’s. “I couldn’t stop thinking of you while I was gone,” he breathed into John’s mouth between kisses. “It was quite distracting.” His hands slid down John’s back to grip his arse as their tempo increased. Sherlock was taking charge of the proceedings and tipping things back in his own favor, which suited John fine. He’d had his way with him; now it was Sherlock’s turn. He pressed his lips to Sherlock’s throat, going still and letting Sherlock fuck him. He knew he’d be on his back any moment, and sure enough, he’d barely thought it before Sherlock wrapped his arms around him and rolled them over.

John giggled as Sherlock settled between his legs, bent, and crushed his mouth to John’s. John hung on as Sherlock took his time with him. He wound his legs around Sherlock’s hips and tilted his own, biting at Sherlock’s mouth as they moved together on their bed. He didn’t know what it meant, or if it meant anything at all, but as much as he enjoyed being on top he also enjoyed this, being taken, accepting Sherlock into his body. There was something about it, something sexy and powerful about being wanted like this and seeing it reflected on Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock pressed his lips to John’s neck, his breath warm and damp. John held him tight, limbs encircling his body as his hips drove forward. He could feel that Sherlock was close by how he was moving. “Yes, yes,” he hissed into Sherlock’s ear. “Harder. Fuck me harder.” Sherlock groaned and moved faster, then his body clenched and stuttered and John felt him come, the intimacy of that act lighting his brain with the bright electricity of their connection.

“Oh, John,” Sherlock gasped, sagging into his arms. He kissed John’s throat and chest as he slid out of him and down his body until he could take John’s cock into his mouth. The sight of Sherlock’s damn near pornographic lips wrapped around him was almost as arousing as the sensation. Sherlock looked up at him from beneath the sweep of his dark lashes, and that was all it took. John was spilled into his mouth with a shout, one hand clenched in Sherlock’s curls.

They lay half-entwined when it was over, catching their breath and wavering in and out of consciousness. John let his arm circle Sherlock’s back, his fingertips tracing the lines of his shoulderblade. Sherlock fetched a deep sigh, which turned into a quiet chuckle. “What?” John said.

“Oh, nothing. Just…a cup of tea and a shag as a ‘welcome home.’ How very British of us.”

John giggled. “The only thing missing was having to queue.”

“If I had to queue to shag you then something would have gone terribly awry.”

John laughed, relaxing into the contentment of having Sherlock home. They grew quiet again. “You were brilliant on Letterman,” John finally said.

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise. “I never know what to say. I always think that I sound like a prat.”
“You didn’t sound like a prat. You were adorable.”

“Hmph. Adorable. What every man dreams of being.”

“Hold up, there. I’ve carried that adjective around for my entire life, you can have your turn now.” He pulled Sherlock closer into his arms. “You said some lovely things.”

“All true.”

“I’m sure you’ve spoken to Irene. She was thrilled.”

“She told me I did well, yes.”

“She said you came across as honest, brave, and charmingly lovestruck.”

“Ugh. How…pedestrian.”

“You looked terribly fit, too.”

Sherlock chuckled. “I wore that shirt just for you. I know you like me in that color.”

“I like you in any color.”

A few moments went by in silence. “I still can’t believe you let Ellen call me.”

John laughed. “Tell me you saved the message.”

“Naturally. But John, my God. My outgoing message is so…so….”

“Sherlocky?”

“Possibly.”

John pressed his lips to Sherlock’s hair. “One more week of publicity and premieres and we’re done.”

“Don’t tease me. Are you sure we’re really done? There isn’t some secret, sneaky obligation we’ll be required to carry out?”

“No. One-hundred-percent done.”

Sherlock went quiet. After a moment’s thought, he propped up on one elbow and looked down at John. “Then I have a proposition.”

“What?”

“Once we’re done, let’s scarper. Get out of town, and not just for a weekend, either. Neither of us have got much on that can’t be rescheduled or taken care of by email. Let’s go home for awhile.”

“Home? You mean London?”

“Well, I was thinking Sussex, but yes. We could spend Christmas there.”

John smiled, touching the tip of his index finger to Sherlock’s nose. “I would love that.” He pulled Sherlock back down against him. “Oh, Irene had another piece of news, as well. She said the advance ticket sales for the limited release are higher than any film in history that wasn’t a sequel or a franchise. We might break Brokeback’s record for highest per-screen average.”
“I find myself not caring in the slightest.”

“You ought to care! If this film does well, it’ll smooth a lot of ruffled feathers.”

“I was never that concerned about this film’s box office. Anybody who’d be put off by our relationship wasn’t going to go see it anyway, so all it can do is help business. It’s the films we haven’t yet done, the ones we haven’t yet been offered. That’s what concerns me.” He rolled away and sat up, propping himself against the headboard. “You need to be able to capitalize on this performance, John. I fear they won’t let you.”

John leaned his head against Sherlock’s bicep. “Will you still love me if I have to take a job digging ditches?”

Sherlock chuckled, a deep basso rumble in his chest, and John felt him kiss the top of his head. “Of course. But it won’t come to that.”

“It won’t?”

“No, I’m sure someone would hire you as a waiter first.”

“Remember the plan,” Irene said, as they rode in the limousine down to Grauman’s Chinese Theater.

“It isn’t as if this our first time on a red carpet,” John said. “Sign some autographs, pose for some photos, have some quick chin-wags with the press.”

“Don’t torture me, Watson. We need to be careful how you present yourselves.” Irene sighed. “No kissing, okay? Let’s take things one step at a time.”

“Did you honestly think we were going to stand there and get off with a million flashbulbs going?” Sherlock sneered.

“It’s my job to anticipate problems, all right?” She shook her head. “I hope it isn’t too much of a madhouse.”

The discussion about how to handle the Los Angeles premiere event had been fraught. The studio’s first idea, that John and Sherlock ought to arrive separately and keep their distance, had been quickly shot down by Irene. Their relationship was public knowledge—in fact, it was becoming a public obsession—and to separate them and pretend it didn’t exist would only draw more attention to it, not to mention it would seem cowardly and disingenuous.

Even their clothing had been a matter for discussion in memos and conference calls. A premiere wasn’t a formal event, so tuxedoes weren’t an option; how should they dress? They shouldn’t clash, as they’d no doubt be in many photos together, but neither should they look like they’d dressed to match each other. Sherlock had chosen a navy blue three-piece suit with a very thin windowpane check in contrasting white, a pearl-gray shirt, and a white tie, while John was wearing a gray suit with a white shirt and a coral tie. In fact, it was the same suit he’d worn when he’d shown up in Sherlock’s dressing room on his closing night. He’d taken it out of the closet and laid it out on the bed, then looked up to see Sherlock watching him with an unusually sweet smile on his face. “My favorite suit,” he’d said.

“There are going to be a lot of movers and shakers at this premiere,” Irene said. “I’m talking the sorts of people who don’t normally attend premieres for films they’re not in. There’s going to be triple the usual amount of press and everyone wants the chance to look like they support your courage and accept your relationship and blah blah blah,” she said, miming a yapping mouth with one hand. “But
even token acknowledgments from as many of the elite as possible could be important for your standing in the community."

“Look, it’s going to be all right,” John said. “You’ve barely slept in two weeks, Irene. You don’t have to do this with us. Sally and Harry are meeting us. Why don’t you go home? It’ll look odd if you’re with us, anyway. We don’t need a minder.”

Irene sighed. “I can’t, John. I’d only go home and stress about it anyway, watching the live feed online. I’ll hang back; nobody will even realize I’m there.”

They were nearing the theater. The crowds were starting to line the streets. People cheering, endless rainbow flags, signs with their names on them…and protestors. A lot of protestors. “Bloody hell,” John muttered.

GET BACK IN THE CLOSET. FAGS OFF THE SCREEN. AIDS IS GOD’S CURSE ON GAYS. SODOMITES BURN IN HELL.

Sherlock reached out and clasped John’s hand. “It’s going to be fine,” he murmured.

John nodded. “I know.” He turned his head and met Sherlock’s eyes.

“Come here,” Sherlock said. “Let me get it out of my system now.”

John smiled and let Sherlock pull him close. They kissed for a few moments, then drew apart.

Sherlock reached out and straightened John’s tie.

“You look gorgeous,” he said.

John grinned. “You look devastating.”

“Are you two through?” Irene said. “We’re next. Please tell me you’re not about to get out of this car with massive boners.”

Sherlock laughed. “We do possess a modicum of self-control, Irene.”

“Speak for yourself,” John muttered. He’d had to run through a few of his more potent anti-erection memory tapes, but everything was under control now.

Their car pulled up to the end of the red carpet. John swallowed hard, pushing down his nervousness. This would be their first joint public appearance since the screening. Their first time stepping out as a couple. Someone opened the car door; Sherlock gave John one last glance, and then stepped out of the car. John heard the massive eruption of cheers and applause. He watched as Sherlock waved, buttoned his jacket, and then he moved aside. John got out, and the whole world was flashbulbs and faces. There were more cameras than he’d ever seen on a red carpet in his long career of walking them. Throng of fans behind the barriers, all of them holding up cameras or mobile phones, many with signs: JOHN + SHERLOCK FOREVER. WE LOVE YOU JOHN + SHERLOCK. EQUALITY ON THE BIG SCREEN. Rainbow flags were everywhere. John waved, and the crowd’s cheers went into hyperdrive.

Harry appeared at John’s side, holding a clipboard. “Sign first, then press,” she murmured in his ear. John moved to the barriers, smiling, to sign some autographs. The excited faces of the fans, the babble of their overlapping voices, the clicks of their cameras and phones—it was almost overwhelming. He signed his name, asking for the fan’s name when possible, posing for a few hasty mobile phone photos, chatting as much as one could in such chaotic circumstances. He glanced to his left and saw that Sherlock was doing the same, about ten yards further down the line. A young man
asked John to sign his very well-defined bicep; John laughed and did so as the nearby onlookers cheered and whistled.

“Entertainment Tonight, John,” came Harry’s voice in his ear. He waved to the fans and let her guide him to where the reporter was stationed. Yes, he was excited about the film. Yes, he and Sherlock were doing fine. Yes, it was a big deal, no it wasn’t revolutionary, fantastic director, amazing script, great opportunity; John barely had to think about it, it was the same boilerplate language he’d spouted on endless red carpets and junket interviews, with the added wrinkle of his relationship being the subject of attention.

Harry guided him to another reporter; he couldn’t even tell who they were with. He saw Sherlock out of the corner of his eye, standing with E!News. John made quick work of the reporter in front of him and moved away to sign some more autographs. He put on his usual rope-line smile and scrawled his name over and over. The faces all blended together. Their excitement and their adulation was at once invigorating and exhausting—an untidy mix that could only be understood by those in the public eye.

John glanced up at the massive marquee above their heads. The film’s title, his face, Sherlock’s face. First, it was a script. Then it was an opportunity. Then it was a dream come true. Then it was a profound professional experience. And now it is a film, about to be seen by audiences, but even if it sinks without a trace, it will have given me more than just a paycheck.

Just a film. Two hours of digital images and sound. A dance in the air of light and color that would dissipate into nothing if it were not stopped by a blank white screen. The culmination of months’ work by hundreds of people. Just a film. An ephemeral conceptualization that could not know John’s deep gratitude, nor could it know the transformation it had wrought in his life. John Watson was now a Before and After, and the line of demarcation was this two-hour series of flickering still frames. John had only had two great loves in his life, and this film had reawakened his passion for one while introducing him to the other.

John turned away from the barriers, his eyes seeking out his partner’s tall figure. Sherlock. Where is Sherlock? I can’t walk this carpet without him. I won’t. He was across the carpet, finishing up an interview. John waved to the spectators and headed toward him, just as Sherlock turned away from the reporter and saw him. They met in the middle. Sherlock gave him a questioning look. What’s wrong?


Sherlock smiled back. He glanced around at the reporters, the photographers, the fans, the protestors, their fellow actors and the Hollywood elite that surrounded them. He looked back at John, one eyebrow arched. Well? Shall we?

John nodded. Hell, yes.

They reached out and joined hands, twining their fingers together, and resumed their walk up the red carpet. The flashbulbs went supernova, and the cheers of the crowd redoubled. They waved at the fans, they talked to the press, they greeted their peers, and they didn’t let go.

Sherlock clambered into the limo after John, both of them barely suppressing giggles. John grabbed him and pulled him in, tossing him down onto the seat and attacking him as the limo door was closed behind them. Sherlock’s hands clamped onto John’s arse as John kissed him, near-frantic with need. They were both on a high that had started with their impromptu hand-in-hand trip down the red carpet and had continued through the rapturous reception that their peers had given To a Stranger.
They’d been congratulated and hugged and had their hands shaken more times than they could count, and now it was off for more of the same. At least there’d be an open bar at the party.

“You owned that red carpet,” Sherlock growled, sucking on John’s neck.

“Don’t leave a lovebite,” John said, pulling back. “We still have to be presentable.” He kissed Sherlock again, and for a few minutes it was just lips and tongues and hands everywhere. “Your mouth,” John murmured, against the mouth in question, his words worked in between kisses, “ought to have epic poems written about it.”

“Are you volunteering?” Sherlock said, kissing John back and chuckling low in his throat.

“God, no. I’m pants at poetry. I’ll just have to be content to kiss the hell out of it.”

“Acceptable,” Sherlock said, grabbing the back of John’s neck and pulling him close again. After a few more moments, he angled his head up to look out the window. “We’re getting close.”

“Goddamn right we are,” John gasped.

“No, smart arse, we’re getting close to the hotel.”

“Oh,” John pulled away, reluctantly. He sat up and straightened his tie. Sherlock did the same, checking that his hair wasn’t too mussed. “I think I’ve just discovered another advantage to dating a bloke,” John said.

“What’s that? And if you say again that it’s nice to be able to share socks I am going to deck you.”

“No,” John said, laughing. “I can get off with you in the backseat of a limo and not have to worry about ruining your makeup, or getting any of it on me.”

Sherlock grinned. “Yes, I think that’s definitely advantage: gay. Although we trade embarrassing makeup stains for the heartbreak of stubble burn.”

The limousine pulled up to the hotel. Photographers and fans were lined up on either side of the entrance, but compared to the throngs at the red carpet it seemed modest and restrained. They gave each other a quick once-over to make sure they didn’t look like they’d just had their tongues down each other’s throats, then climbed out. This time, there was no hesitation. John reached out for Sherlock’s hand just as he emerged, and they walked into the hotel together, waving and smiling.

The party was well underway by the time they entered. They got a healthy round of applause as they entered, which they acknowledged with a few bows and waves, and then everyone went back to the business of partying. “Drink?” Sherlock asked him.

“God, yes.”

“Be right back.” He squeezed John’s hand and vanished into the crowd.

“John!” said a familiar voice, its owner emerging from the throng near the bar.

John grinned. “Paul, Jenny! I didn’t know you’d be here,” he said, hugging them each in turn.

“Wouldn’t have missed it. The film turned out quite well, didn’t it?”

“Thanks, thanks so much.”

“You were amazing,” Jenny said. She certainly sounded like she meant it.
John went a bit pink. He still felt like a fidgety schoolboy around her. “It was a really tough part, but the good kind of tough, you know?”

“And you’ve got more out of it than just a line on your résumé,” Paul said, his eyes twinkling.

John laughed. “Quite. I seem to have acquired a tall, cranky thespian along the way. I don’t know what to do, he just keeps hanging about.”

“Speak of the devil,” Paul said, as Sherlock reappeared with a glass of red wine and a gin and tonic.

“Sherlock, I don’t think you’ve met Paul and Jenny,” John said, taking the gin and tonic.

“No, I haven’t,” Sherlock said, shaking Paul’s hand and then Jenny’s.

“Good to meet you,” Paul said. “Astonishing performance in the film.”

“Thank you. My co-star was a bit of a hack, but I muddled through.” They laughed, and John started to relax. He was glad to have a chance to chat with Paul and Jenny, and especially for them to meet Sherlock. They were friends that he trusted and a welcome presence here, where even people’s praise had to be examined for ulterior motives. After a few minutes, Sherlock excused himself to talk to a friend from RADA. Jenny watched him go, then turned back to John. “He seems lovely, John.”

“Oh, don’t be fooled. He’s on his best behavior tonight.”

“One hears such things about him. He doesn’t seem like a man who’d be so…difficult.”

“He can be. Especially about the work. But I can handle him.”

“You look really happy,” Jenny said.

John sighed. “I am. God, it sounds cheesy, like something from one of my rom-coms, but I never knew I could be this happy.”

“Well, mate, we’ve got to be off,” Paul said. “Say goodbye to your better half for us.”


“What?”

John grinned. “I’m the better half.”

They laughed and headed off. John glanced around, but didn’t see Sherlock. He meandered toward the buffet with a mind toward investigating the hors d’oeuvres situation, but he was stopped halfway there by Jim Schamus. “John, I’m glad I caught you.”

“Jim, hello. It went well tonight, I thought.”

“Very well. Ticket pre-sales are looking very promising,” Jim said. “The reviews are stellar.”

“Am I forgiven for falling in love with my co-star and stealing your news cycle?”

Jim gave him a wry smile. “Talk to me after nominations come out.”

“Who are you putting up?”

“What do you mean?”
“For Lead versus Supporting. May as well flip a coin.”

Jim swirled the ice in his glass. “Well, that’s an interesting question, John. We’re going in a different direction.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re putting you both up for Lead.”

John blinked. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m quite serious.”

“We’ll split the vote and neither of us will get nominated.”

“According to our research, you stand an excellent chance of both being nominated.”

“Then we’ll split the vote and neither of us will win.”

“But if you’re both on the ballot….”

The light dawned. “I see. Turning it to your favor, is that it? John versus Sherlock? A house divided? Oh, the melodrama and the magazine covers.”

“It’ll make for great press.”

“Very clever, Jim.”

He sighed. “It’s not all a strategy. I feel strongly that you both deserve a nomination. They’re both leading roles, and both brilliantly performed. I have every confidence that one of you will win.”

“It’s too early to make predictions.”

“Not too early to make plans, though.” Jim smiled. “John, I hope you and Sherlock know that whatever else happens, I’m very happy for you, personally.”

“Thanks. Everyone’s saying that. Whether that happiness extends to hiring either of us ever again remains to be seen.”

“I’d hire you again. In a heartbeat.”

“To play someone other than a gay man, I mean.”

Jim chuckled. “How about a serial killer?”

“Oh, yes. The next logical step,” John said, laughing.

Sherlock came up to his side, sliding one arm around John’s shoulders. “Evening, Jim,” he said.

“Sherlock. It’s been a good night so far.”

“Hello, darling,” John said, feeling buoyant. He kissed Sherlock’s cheek.

Sherlock arched an eyebrow. “How many gin and tonics have you had?”

“This is still my first. Just enough to take the edge off.”
“Well, this might help. I just had a lovely chat with Spielberg. He was…supportive.”

Jim sighed. “Yes, he would be, in public. A lot of people will be. Much as I wish the focus could be on the film itself, our box office will probably benefit from all the attention. But I worry for your future in the business.”

John sighed. “It’s a party. Let’s leave off the bollocks political maneuvering and try to enjoy ourselves.”

Sherlock made a face. “I suppose we are the main attraction, and are therefore expected to…mingle.” He shuddered a little.

John gave him A Look. “And you’ve been doing so well, too.”

“The banality of Hollywood small talk is rapidly eroding my dedication to uphold the promise I made you that I’d behave.”

“You’ll survive.” He took Sherlock’s hand and they bid goodbye to Jim, then left the bar and waded into the crush of people.

For the next hour, they mingled, chatted, and were congratulated by a lot of people John barely knew. He was really beginning to crave the company of someone he actually cared about when he saw a familiar face approaching through the crowd. “John!”

He met Rachel halfway, hugging her tightly. “There you are, pigeon,” he said, grinning. “I was wondering where you’d got off to, I didn’t see you leave the premiere.”

“Oh, we had to stop off at my agent’s office,” she said, flapping an impatient hand. “I’m so sorry we’re late. Oh, John, I…” She broke off, shaking her head a little.

John nodded. “I know, luv. I know.” She hugged him again. “My life’s a bit topsy-turvy since I saw you last.”

She laughed. “I’d say that’s an understatement! John, have you met Daniel?” she said, indicating her new husband, who was waiting patiently at her elbow.

“No, we haven’t met,” John said, shaking the his hand, trying to keep a dignified look on his face while his mind yammered oh god oh god it’s james motherfucking bond and dear god he is fucking gorgeous.

“Good to meet you, John,” Daniel said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Well, I hadn’t heard much of you,” John teased, shooting Rachel a look. “Would have been nice to at least get an email that you were getting married!”

“I know, I know,” she said, hanging on to John’s hand. “We wanted to be quick and quiet about it.”

“That you were. You ought to meet…oh, where the hell is he? Hang on a mo.” He took a few steps away, finally catching sight of Sherlock talking to a man whose name John couldn’t recall, a twentysomething runway-ready specimen who John had seen in one of those “Top 30 Under 30” articles about up-and-coming actors. Sherlock was babbling about something, but the other man was…God, he couldn’t have been more obvious if he bent over and presented like a bonobo. John darted over and tugged on Sherlock’s sleeve. “Sherlock, come meet Rachel and Daniel.”

“Oh yes, of course.” He turned away from his conversational companion without a word. The young
man was watching Sherlock leave with a wistful glance at his arse; John tossed him a stern look as he led Sherlock away.

John steered Sherlock back over to Rachel and made introductions. Sherlock smiled and shook hands all around, and there was more gushing over the film. “Listen, I really admire what you two did,” Daniel said. “It’s about time.”

“We didn’t set out to be trailblazers,” John said.

“And now we get to stand around and wonder if we still have careers,” Sherlock added.

Rachel shook her head. “I’m worried about that. People’s careers have been sunk by less.”

“And yet Tom Cruise can spout the most insane gibberish you ever heard and he still has one,” Sherlock said.

Daniel made an irritated noise. “Well, he’s Cruise, isn’t he? And I wouldn’t lay odds on his longevity. Circling the drain, from what I hear.”

“Hope you won’t be hearing the same about us,” John said.

“We’ve just come from London,” Rachel said. “A lot of people there are rather hoping you two will come home.”

“May just do,” Sherlock said. “Anyway, we’re going spend some time in Sussex after the premieres. I suppose what we do after that will depend on what comes up. I may have some theater on next summer.”

“If you hit a rough patch, we’ll just re-team for another rom-com, John,” Rachel said, grinning. “We’ve only been asked a hundred times.”

“Fantastic. We’ll be the new Meg-and-Tom.”

They laughed, and the conversation flowed easily. Daniel seemed like a pleasant fellow. He and Rachel were aglow together, and it made John wonder if he and Sherlock had the same glow. As they stood chatting, Sherlock’s arm settled around John’s waist, his thumb making small strokes on his back, and John leaned into his side a little bit. At one point, while Sherlock and Daniel were talking over one another in their shared enthusiasm for Frankenheimer, John caught Rachel’s eye. She glanced from him to Sherlock and back again, then gave him a fond, understanding smile. John smiled back.

Eventually, Rachel and Daniel took their leave with more handshakes and cheek-kisses and promises to get together soon. “She’s rather lovely,” Sherlock commented.

“She is. Once upon a time I quite fancied her. I suppose I still do.”

“Hmm. I’ll keep that in mind.”

John took Sherlock’s hand. “Come on.”

“Come on where?”

“Come on, with me.” John led him down a deserted hallway off the lobby, looking for a private spot. He found an unused coat-check room and ducked inside, pulling Sherlock after him and shutting the door. “All right, Your Majesty. Who was the pretty boy?”
Sherlock frowned. “Whoever can you be referring to?”

“That tarty lad you were talking to before I brought you over to meet Rachel.”

“One of those twentyish chaps who fancies himself the next Brad Pitt. I’ve no idea who he was.”

“Then why were you talking to him?”

“He said he’d seen me in Closer and wanted to ask me about my performance.”

“That git’s probably never been to London in his life. Sherlock, he was trying to pull you.”

Sherlock blinked. “Yes, of course he was. Am I supposed to have taken some sort of preventative action?” Sherlock cocked an eyebrow. “John. Please, say that you’re not actually jealous.”

John stuck his chin out. “Why on Earth should I be?”

“You are,” Sherlock said, a smile spreading slowly over his face. “You’re jealous.”

“Wouldn’t you bloody well be? If I were being chatted up by some fit young twat?”

“Says the man who was, not five minutes ago, mentally undressing Daniel Craig before my very eyes.”

“That’s different! And I was not!”

“Oh, but you were. At least I displayed no interest in that fit young twat, as you call him. Whatever sexual interest he may have in me is none of my business. And don’t look like that, I don’t blame you for ogling Mr. Craig. He is quite dishy, after all. But honestly, John. Surely you couldn’t entertain any notion that I’d have the slightest interest in that young man?”

John crossed his arms. “No. I suppose not.”

Sherlock stepped closer. “You suppose not, eh?” He dipped his head down and fixed John with an intense stare. “You know you’re the only man for me, don’t you?”

John shivered a bit at the purr in his voice. The things he could do with that instrument sometimes bordered on the indecent. “Yes, I know.”

“Good. In that case, I think I shall go out there and find that young man and ask him to chat me up some more.”


“It occurs to me that the last time you got jealous, I got rather spectacularly shagged. So it might behoove me to cultivate some jealousy in you now and then.” He slid a finger under John’s lapel, his voice dropping again to lion-in-the-wild levels. “Might I be the happy beneficiary of the consequences?”

John looked up at him, his jaw clenched. “Keep it up, Holmes, and you’ll be their beneficiary right here in this cupboard.”

Sherlock smirked. “I trust my point is made.” He bent and kissed John, hard and swift. “We’d best get back, though.”

“Hang on a moment. Sherlock…all right, yes, I was a tad jealous, but this is serious. You’ve got to
be more careful. Neither of us can be seen flirting with other people, or being flirted with. We’ve just come out, we can’t afford ‘trouble in paradise’ rumors to start now. And you know that the busybodies in this town are stalking our every move, looking for signs of discord that can be blown up into reports that we’re on the rocks already.”

“That’s preposterous. We’re not on the rocks.”

“Of course not. But it won’t do for you to be photographed with some chap making googly-eyes at you.”

Sherlock nodded. “All right, I see your point. God, but it’s tiresome.”

“I know. The attention will ease up eventually. I hope,” he added, under his breath, as Sherlock opened the coat-check door and they walked back down the hall to the party.

“I’m for another drink,” Sherlock said. “You?”

“Not just now, thanks.” Sherlock disappeared into the crowd. John hung back for a moment, drawing no one’s attention from where he stood in the shadows of the hallway.

“It’s all fake, you know.”

John turned, startled. The young man who’d been chatting up Sherlock was standing right next to him. “I beg your pardon?”

“All of this. These congratulations, all this support. It’ll vanish the moment you actually want a job. It’s all lip service, because no one wants to get a rep as an intolerant douchebag. You’re not hearing what’s being said behind closed doors.”

“Oh, and I suppose you’re privy to all these secret conversations,” John said.

“My boyfriend’s an assistant director; he hears things.” The man knocked back the rest of his drink. “Six months. That’s how long it’ll take. That’s how long people will feel obligated to put on a supportive face so as not to appear homophobic. Six months until they’ve put in their time and can start avoiding you like the plague. Might be a year if this movie wins an Oscar, or if one of you does. Yeah, the art-house crowd might stick by you, but you can’t ride that train forever. No way does some Midwestern hick watch a movie starring some guy he knows is a fag. So it’ll be genre pictures or snooty Shakespeare that nobody will ever see. Kind of a comedown from the paychecks you’re used to. I hope his ass is worth it.”

John ground his teeth together. Irene will axe-murder you if you punch someone at a premiere party. “You certainly seemed to be appreciating it earlier.”

The man sighed, and went on as if John had not spoken. “You’re the one who’ll have to be realistic here. He’s spent his life in an ivory tower, the happy land of indie films and highbrow cinema where you can be alternative and nobody cares. You and I work in the real world. We know the score.”

John turned and faced him. “Stay the hell away from Sherlock, you got that? I don’t know who you think you are, but he is spoken for.”

The man smiled, a sad, resigned smile. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t try it. He’s just so damn pretty, I couldn’t resist the chance to talk to him. You two seem good together—I respect that. It’s just—I wish the business really were how it’s pretending to be right now.” He started to walk away, but turned back. “Oh, by the way, thanks for nothing. Now that you guys have popped the cherry, my boyfriend wants us to come out, too.” He shook his head, then turned and left.
John stood there for a moment, stunned. He shrugged it off and headed back into the fray. He spotted Sherlock in a corner talking with...*my God, is that Ron Howard?* John approached and they both looked up. “Oh, John, good,” Sherlock said, taking his hand and pulling him down to sit next to him. “Do you know—”

“Yes, Ron and I had a couple of meetings when he was casting *Angels and Demons,*” John said, shaking the director's hand. “Good to see you.”

“Likewise, John. I’m breaking the rules a little, springing this on you before we’ve got the official go-ahead,” Ron said, scooting a bit closer. “But I was just about to tell Sherlock that Brian and I are working up a project that I hope he’ll be interested in.”

“What sort of project?” Sherlock asked.

“An HBO miniseries. We’re looking at six hours total, three two-hour episodes. We’re ready to start pre-production and casting; we’re just waiting for the green light from HBO on the financials.” He hesitated. “It’s something a little different for us, but we’re really excited about it. Your name is at the top of a very short list for the lead role.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense, Ron,” Sherlock said.

“It’s about the life of Nikola Tesla. He was super interesting, the story practically writes itself.”

John could almost feel Sherlock vibrating. He had a keen interest in science, and to play a famous scientific figure was one of his dreams. That it would be Tesla was just the icing on the cake. “Is there a script?” Sherlock asked, his voice admirably even, betraying nothing of the fact that John knew he had to be holding himself back from flying across the couch and shrieking “Where do I sign?”

“Script is still being worked on. Bill Broyles is co-writing it with Simon Singh, who’s a really fantastic science journalist.”

Sherlock glanced at John. “When do you want to shoot?” he asked.

“We’d love to start principal next fall and air it in summer of 2013.”

“Have you, well…” Sherlock hesitated. “Does HBO know that you want me for this role?”

“They do.” Ron smiled. “If you’re concerned about your marketability, they’re not worried about it. It helps that Tesla was celibate his whole life, so…well....”

“There wouldn’t be a love interest,” Sherlock said.

“Cable’s the place to take risks these days,” Ron said. “I mean, I’m not your agent or anything, but I think this would be a really good way for you stay in the market. This could be Emmy material for you, and good visibility.”

John squeezed Sherlock’s hand. Sherlock nodded, squeezing back. “Well, Ron, it’s hard to talk seriously about it without a script, but I’m very interested.”

Ron smiled. “Good. I’ll send some pages to your agent, all right?” He got up. Sherlock and John did the same. “I just wanted to float it past you.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Sherlock said. “who are you looking at to play Edison? In any biopic about Tesla, he’d almost be a villainous figure.”
“I know,” Ron said, grinning with glee. “We’re counting on that. Nothing’s official, but we’re hoping to meet with Liev Schreiber.”

Sherlock laughed. “Don’t make me want this job too much, Ron.”

Ron shook his head. “I don’t think you could want it more than we want you. Think it over, read the pages. I’ll be in touch with your agent.” He got up. “I have to get going. Guys, look…this film tonight knocked my socks off. Really, really great work.”

“Thank you,” John said. “And while you’re handing out dream projects, let me know if you’ve got one for me, too.”

Ron laughed. “I’ll do that. Good to see you guys.” They all shook hands, and Ron left.

Sherlock turned slowly toward John, head down, his hands coming up to grip John’s forearms. “John,” he breathed.

“I know.”

“John.”

“I know.”

“Did that just happen?”

“It did. I was right here.”

Sherlock lifted his chin and met John’s eyes. “Nikola Tesla, John. Tesla.”

John laughed at his fanboy glee. “Don’t get too worked up, it could still fall apart.”

“They’re into casting and scriptwriting, they wouldn’t be that far into it if they weren’t serious. John, my God….” He shook his head.

Sherlock constantly battled boredom and was always hoping for work that would excite him; when such work was offered, he could be almost childlike in his unrestrained enthusiasm. For John, who just wanted him to be happy, seeing him like this was—God, John wanted to kiss him. He didn’t see any photographers nearby, but it was the ones you didn’t see that you had to worry about.

He was spared the decision by Sally appearing out of nowhere. “You two have got a few things to tick off before you can leave,” she said, without preamble. “You need to get some face time with Ang and Molly and the other castmembers, the photogs need some candids, and I’ve got a whole list of people here who want to congratulate you.”

John nodded. “When’s our flight tomorrow?”

Sally made a face. “Bloody eight a.m. I tried to get it later, but they want you two in New York in time for a photocall and press conference.”

Sherlock’s good humor had vanished. “Junkets, John. Junkets will be the death of me, I swear it.”

“It’s only a week,” John said, gripping his hand. “One more week and then it’ll be you and me and Sussex and Christmas. No agents, no paps, no press, no public relations.”

“Keep talking. I may need you to compose me some sort of mantra to recite when we’re in our hundredth airport in four days.”
Sally grinned. “I’m having the Findleys get the house ready for you two. Oh, and Sherlock, don’t forget to ring Mycroft.”

“How could I? The bastard texts me once a day.”

“Might I finally meet this brother of yours?” John asked. “And your Mum?”

“Possibly, if it’s excruciating agony you desire for your holiday diversions.”

“They can’t be that bad.”

“They can, and they are, and they’re rather chuffed about it, too.”

“I’m going to be picturing you and me in front of that big fireplace to get myself through the next week,” John said.

Sherlock looked down at him, a real smile sneaking onto his face. “Hmm. Yes, that might just do for me as well. Tell me, what are we wearing while we’re in front of this fire?”

Sally rolled her eyes. John ignored her and squeezed Sherlock’s fingers. “I think you can suss that out, if you put those deductive powers to work on it.”

Sherlock shook his head, sighing. “Sally, let’s get ourselves sorted here, shall we? My desire to kiss this man is rapidly gaining ground on my desire to preserve public discretion, and if we dally for too long I fear it will leave it in the dust, and then all my troubles will be over, because Irene will kill me.”

Chapter End Notes

Meta Notes

1. Just Jared is a gossip website; AfterElton.com is a gay-focused pop culture website.

2. Paul and Jenny are Paul Bettany and Jennifer Connelly, making a return appearance from an early chapter.

3. Rachel is Rachel Weisz, John’s co-star in Rewind, which was the successful and well-reviewed romantic comedy that got John started in the genre. Weisz made some headlines earlier this summer with the out-of-nowhere news that she’d married Daniel Craig, almost in secret.

4. The pretty boy that chats up Sherlock is not meant to be anyone in particular.

5. Ron Howard referenced “Brian,” by whom he means Brian Grazer, his producing partner. Howard and Grazer are co-founders of Imagine Entertainment.

6. Sherlock and Daniel bond over their love of director John Frankenheimer, who directed The Manchurian Candidate and Seven Days in May and who was known for psychological/political thrillers.

7. Bill Broyles is a screenwriter known for historical/military scripts; he wrote Apollo 13, Cast Away, and Saving Private Ryan. Simon Singh is a science writer whose books,
including *Fermat's Enigma* and *The Big Bang*, I highly recommend for layreaders with an interest in science.

8. John’s conversation with Jim about the Oscar nominations reflects real conventional wisdom; in reality it is very unlikely that both John and Sherlock would both be submitted for consideration as a lead actor. It is the filmmakers who decide who is going to be submitted and in which category, not the actors, so this decision is not up to John and Sherlock. This occurred with *Brokeback Mountain*, which led to the odd situation of Jake Gyllenhaal being nominated as a supporting actor even though he actually had more lines of dialogue in the film! But hey, it’s a fanfic, suspend your disbelief.
Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Sherlock glared at his mobile as if it had wronged him personally. John had taken the bags upstairs to their bedroom, so Sherlock thought he’d take a moment alone to make the call he’d been dreading. He blew air through his teeth and reluctantly tapped out the number.

“Arrived safely?” said the smarmy voice on the other end of the line, without so much as a perfunctory greeting.

“As you are no doubt aware.”

“I hope you had a pleasant journey.”

“We did not, as you are also no doubt aware.” Sherlock sighed. “After what happened in Sydney, we’re just glad to be—away from the world.”

“The incident is being looked into.”

“By you?”

“Naturally. The collective intelligence of the Sydney police department barely outshines the average flatworm.” Mycroft paused. “How is John?”

“He’s upset. He gets so bullish when he’s upset. It’s like trying to reason with a Sherman tank. The drive down here was—tense.”

“Surely he doesn’t blame you.”

“I don’t know who he should blame, if not me.”

“Ashes and sackcloth do not flatter your colouring, my dear brother.”

“Oh, shut it, won’t you?”

“Do let me know of a good time for me to pop down for a visit.”

“Are you free a week from never?”

“Don’t be such a nuisance. Surely you haven’t forgotten the request you made of me. All the paperwork is in order.”

Sherlock shut his eyes. “Can’t you send it by the post? Or a messenger? Must I see you?”

“You wound me deeply. I’m very eager to meet your young man.”

“Do stop talking like a Victorian toff, Mycroft. He isn’t my ‘young man,’ he’s four years older than me. He’s my partner, as I am forced to refer to him by the unimaginative English language.”

“I’m coming down tomorrow.”

Sherlock grit his teeth. “If you’d already made plans, why did you bother asking?”
“When are you and John coming north?”

“We’re not, to my knowledge.”

“You cannot possibly intend to stay a month in Sussex and somehow avoid a visit. Mummy talks of little else.”

“I intend to ‘somehow’ avoid a visit through the cunning plan of not visiting.”

He heard Mycroft sigh. “We’ll discuss it at a later time. I will see you tomorrow.”

Sherlock hung up. He looked out the window to the garden, hoping for some of that elusive serenity that they’d come here to find. He hung up his coat in the front hall and got out his laptop; he was just about to delve into his distressingly long queue of emails when he realized that John had been gone for rather a long time. He went to the foot of the staircase. “John?” No answer. He started up the stairs.

The door to their room stood open, and when he reached the threshold he couldn’t help but smile. John had executed a full faceplant and now lay sprawled over the bed, fast asleep.

Sherlock shook his head. *There go my hopes for some celebratory ‘we made it here in one piece’ sex.* He sat down on the bed by his side. “John.” He shook his shoulder a bit. John snuffled and lifted his head.

“Wha? M’I asleep?”

“Well, not anymore. Would you prefer to nap?”

“Mmm. No.” He pushed himself up to a sitting position, rubbing the heel of his hand into his eyes. “Want to eat something first.” He turned away and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He did not get up, but just sat there, his shoulders rigid with tension.

Sherlock sighed. “John, we are supposed to be relaxing. We came here to get away.”

“We can’t get away. It will always be with us, so we might as well get used to it.” He got up and headed for the door. Sherlock watched him go; he was sure there was something he could say that would make it all better, but he couldn’t think of what it might be. John hesitated, then turned back. “Look, I…. ” He ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t talk about this now. I don’t want to think about it. I just want to make some dinner and relax. It feels too close, like it’s crawling all over me.”

“All right,” Sherlock said, staring down at his hands.

“Sherlock?”

“Hmm?”

“Look at me.”

Sherlock lifted his head and met John’s eyes. “What?”

He saw John’s mind start to form words, perhaps reassuring words. Perhaps words to reaffirm that he loved Sherlock, that he’d never leave him, no matter how ugly things got, no matter what happened. But then John’s face sagged a little. “You want some tea?”

“Yes, please. I’ll just… get us sorted up here.”
John nodded and went downstairs. Sherlock sat where he was for a moment, marveling at the speed at which things could go from fantastic to fucked up. He got up and opened their suitcases full of brand-new clothes, some with the tags still on. Almost nothing had been salvageable from their hotel room in Sydney. The intruders had used knives and scissors and destroyed nearly everything they owned. Sherlock remembered standing in the middle of the mess, holding the tattered remains of John’s gray suit—Sherlock’s favorite. He thought of John wearing that suit in Sherlock’s dressing room, the nervous anticipation on John’s face, and then their first kiss.

It was ludicrous to mourn the loss of a garment, and yet he did. What he mourned more than John’s gray suit was the loss of their equilibrium. They’d been in a bubble, a secure little bubble where everything would be all right. Talk radio hosts might call them names and protestors might tote badly-spelled signs, but nothing really bad would happen. Their careers might become harder to manage, but they wouldn’t really be out of jobs. Some people might say and write mean things, and some might stop going to their films, but no one would really hate them. That secure bubble was gone now. He’d seen it go in the look on John’s face when he’d seen the vitriol scrawled on their hotel room wall in spray paint.

Sherlock put the empty suitcases in the closet and went downstairs. The kettle was on the hob, and John was in the living room, looking about. “Your caretakers really went all out, didn’t they?” he said, smiling a little.

“Indeed. They’re not accustomed to having an entire week’s notice of my arrival. It seems they put it to good use.” The Findleys, the local couple who maintained the property, had decorated the house for Christmas. Roping, wreaths and white lights adorned the exterior, and inside there were pine boughs and ribbons and tasteful centerpieces everywhere. Antique Father Christmas figurines stood on the mantelpiece, and lacy glass stars hung in the windows with electric candles set to a timer. It was all quite festive. “Mrs. Findley is forever after me to let her redecorate. I imagine she saw this as her chance to put her mark on the place in a temporary fashion.”

“It was very nice of them. I’ve not had a proper Christmas in years and years. This is like something out of a magazine. Or one of those Bing Crosby films.” John looked at him, then squared up his shoulders and stepped closer. “Sherlock, listen—”

“John, there’s no need for you to say anything.”

“There is. I know things went a bit pear-shaped after the business in Sydney. It gave me a bad turn, and I know it did you, too.” He reached out and grasped Sherlock’s hand. “I know you. You’re thinking dire thoughts about how any moment now, I’m going to decide you’re just not worth the trouble.” Sherlock fidgeted a bit, not wanting to confirm nor deny. “My temper is a caution. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. None of this is your fault.”

“It is. If you weren’t with me—”

“If I weren’t with you, I…” He shook his head. “I wish I were a writer, and could think of some profound way to finish that sentence, but I can’t. If I weren’t with you, I would be sad and alone and half-dead without realizing it. If I weren’t with you, I…well, I wouldn’t have you.” He lifted his hand and smoothed it down Sherlock’s cheek. “I love you. So much.”

Sherlock met his eyes. “You astonish me, John.”

“What happened in Sydney may happen again. If it does, I will probably go off on a tear and throw things and curse a lot. I know that bothers you.”

“I dislike seeing you in distress, and so…but rational.”
“Distress is unavoidable, especially in the life we now lead. We’ll both have to accept it.” He kissed Sherlock’s lips. “Come on, now. Tea’s on.”

They went into the kitchen and sat at the island with their tea. “You may get one of your Christmas wishes sooner than you thought,” Sherlock said. “My brother will be here tomorrow.”

“Oh, lovely!”

“Don’t get too excited, he’s a colossal prat. He is quite keen to meet you, however, so he may put on his company manners. I’m sure he’d rather not be thrown from the house.”

“It’s his house, too. I wouldn’t have the nerve.”

“I daresay there isn’t much you don’t have the nerve for. He will make the case for us to venture north to visit my family home, so that you might meet our mother.”

“Weren’t we going to do that anyway?”

“Yes, but he doesn’t know that. I enjoy watching him attempt to browbeat me into submission. Just play along. I must take my merriment at his expense where I can.”

“Spoken like a true younger brother. I am one and I’ve got one, so I sympathize.”

Sherlock stared down into his tea. “Speaking of that, I….” He paused and cleared his throat. “I think it would be wise if I did not accompany you to Hampstead.”

John set his mug down and put on his ‘do not even start with me’ face. “Oh, no. We are not going over this again. We decided that you were coming.”

“That was before Sydney.”

“Sydney changes nothing.”

“I’m afraid it does. Your parents already view me as a deviant who seduced their son into a life of depravity and perversion. Now they have tangible evidence that the life we share is fraught with peril and worth deriding.”

“I don’t give a rat’s arse what they think. You are coming for Christmas Eve. My parents are… better.”

“Better? The last time you spoke to them your mother sobbed the whole time and your father asked you if you were going to start wearing women’s clothing.”

“But he didn’t curse. That was an improvement. Anyway, the rest of the family wants to meet you, and none of them think we’re perverts.”

“I don’t wish to cause any further discord. You’re in a delicate position with your parents, and my presence would only bring them face to face with the man who’s shagging their son. Whatever miniscule progress has been made might be unmade.”

John’s brow was furrowing. “I don’t understand this. What happened to the man who wanted us to go public from the start? The one who didn’t care what anyone else thought, who said he does what he wants, and fuck you?”

Sherlock sighed. “That man may have died in Sydney.”
“No. He can’t have. He didn’t.”

“The stakes weren’t so high before. It didn’t matter if total strangers thought ill of us. But this is your family. I can’t be the cause of your estrangement from them, it will only make you resent me in the end.”

“How many times must I say that if there is estrangement, it’s them causing it, not you?”

“I see no reason to fan the flames. You should go for Christmas Eve. I will stay here, and you and I can have our Christmas together as we planned. It’s the logical course of action.”

“Well, fuck logic!” John exclaimed, his face reddening with anger. “Goddamnit, Sherlock. You’re giving me whiplash. You can’t out us to the entire Internet and then turn around and worry about upsetting my parents! It’s done! Pandora’s box is bloody well open and we can’t shut it again! Fuck them all if they don’t like it, fuck those bastards in Sydney, and fuck my stroppy parents, too! You are coming home with me for Christmas if I have to sling you over my shoulder and drag you there!”

Sherlock blinked. “How can you drag me if I’m slung over your shoulder?”

John just stared for a moment, then suddenly lunged forward, grabbed Sherlock’s face and kissed him, hard. “You bloody wanker,” he grumbled between kisses that felt like they might leave bruises.

Sherlock clutched at John’s clothes, pulling him off his stool. John lost his balance and fell sideways, dragging Sherlock with him, and they both toppled to the kitchen floor. John kept kissing him as he pushed him over onto his back, biting at his lips, grabbing at his arms. Sherlock clenched one hand in John’s hair and the other on his arse. John fumbled with Sherlock’s zip until he got both of their trousers open just enough that they could press together skin to skin, sliding against one another, too impatient to bother undressing.

“Christ,” Sherlock said, through clenched teeth, his head slamming back into the tile floor. They hadn’t had sex in what felt like forever and he was ready to go off any second. John propped himself on one hand and reached between them, seizing both their cocks and tipping his hips into Sherlock’s.

“God, let’s just get off, we can have proper sex later,” he said.

Sherlock nodded, his hand still gripping John’s arse. “Quickly. I’m not going to last.”

“Me neither,” John said, ducking to mouth Sherlock’s neck, his hand still wrapped around them both. His back arched as he thrust against Sherlock, who wrapped one leg around John’s thigh and bucked back at him, his arousal spiking.

“John…I’m going to…I’m just….”

“Yes, God yes,” John grunted. He went rigid and came on Sherlock’s belly. Sherlock bit his lip and followed suit. John collapsed on top of him, his hand trapped between their stomachs.

Sherlock held him, one hand stroking his hair. When he didn’t move after a few moments, he shook him a bit. “John?”

“Mmmph.”

“This kitchen floor isn’t the most comfortable thing I’ve ever lain on.”

John jerked a bit and pulled back. “Oh blast, I’m sorry.” He got up, extracting his hand, and went to the sink for a damp towel to mop them off. “Although you aren’t the most comfortable thing to lie
on, either. All bones and angles,” he said, smirking as he gave Sherlock a hand up off the floor.

Sherlock swayed on his feet a bit. “I’m suddenly exhausted,” he muttered.

“It’s no wonder,” John said, hanging on to him. “You’ve barely slept in days.” He smoothed Sherlock’s disheveled curls back from his face. “Let’s table the Christmas discussion for now, all right? I’m done in. Let’s just go upstairs and have a bath and get in bed.”

Sherlock nodded. “I’ll be needing a good night’s sleep if I’m to face my brother in the morning.”

When John woke up, Sherlock had already risen. He sighed, briefly disappointed that there’d be no morning sex today, then turned over to check the time. Christ, it’s half past ten. I must have needed the sleep.

That he’d needed rest wasn’t surprising. They both did. The premieres had been ten days of whirlwind travel, nonstop media and public attention, and precious little downtime with nary a moment to themselves. For all that everyone was obsessed with their state of couplehood, they hadn’t had much opportunity to be a couple. Dragged from one media event to the next, interviews both separate and together, red carpets where it was now expected that they’d hold hands, and premiere parties full of paparazzi—he felt like he’d barely exchanged ten words a day with Sherlock. Each night, they’d toppled into bed, too tired to do more than mutter goodnights and perhaps exchange a quick kiss before falling asleep.

The knowledge that once it was all over they’d have a whole month alone together had seen him through the chaos. And then, on the eve of their liberation, the last stop of their tour had turned into a nightmare.

John got out of bed and put on his dressing gown over his pajamas. He padded barefoot down the stairs, smelling coffee brewing. “Sherlock, why didn’t you wake me?” he said, coming into the living room. “I was hoping for a morning shag….” He stopped short, his face blowing up red, when he saw that they weren’t alone.

Sherlock was sitting at one end of the sofa, glaring at the well-dressed man seated opposite. “Ah, Mr. Watson,” Mycroft said. “So nice to finally meet you.”

John put on a smile that felt a tad brittle, and shook the man’s hand. “Nice to meet you as well.” He gestured to his dressing gown. “I’m sorry I’m not more presentable, I didn’t realize that you were expected first thing in the morning.” He sat down next to Sherlock, who immediately reached out and took his hand.

“Think nothing of it.” He smiled at John, but it was a careful smile that belonged more on the face of a diplomat than on the face of one’s sort-of brother-in-law. “I’ve been watching all of your public appearances with interest. You’re quite the stand-up fellow, aren’t you?”

John smiled back. “Not quite sure how to take that,” he said, keeping his tone pleasant.

“Oh, it’s kindly meant, I assure you. Yes, I think my brother has done rather well for himself.”

Sherlock snorted. “Mycroft labours under the delusion that we’re all living in an Evelyn Waugh novel, John. Don’t mind him.”

“Our mother is most anxious to meet you, as well.”

“I told you—we won’t have time for a trip north,” Sherlock said.
Mycroft gave him that diplomat’s smile again. “You must also be a patient man, John, to tolerate him in such quantities. Sherlock, you are obviously planning to go north and visit Mummy, but denying it just to get under my skin. I assure you, it won’t work. And I believe I am in the possession of some—collateral, shall we say? To induce you to make good on your plans?”

John glanced at Sherlock, who was clenching his jaw. “What collateral?’

“Never mind,” Sherlock said. “You do enjoy making my life hell, don’t you?”

“On the contrary, my only hope is to look after you. Speaking of which, I’ve some new information about the incident in Sydney.”

John felt Sherlock’s hand tighten on his a bit. “Go on,” Sherlock said.

“We’ve determined that the intruders gained entrance to your hotel room through the disappointingly low-tech strategy of bribing one of the hotel staff for your room number and a master key. They walked in like any other guest, went to your floor, donned the amateurish masks we saw them wearing in the surveillance videos, and entered your room. They wore gloves, so no fingerprints could be recovered. The staff member they bribed has been relieved of his position, naturally, and the police are, I believe, considering a charge against him in the hopes that he will identify the intruders. Our forensic analysts are attempting to match the masked intruders with guests caught on camera in the lobby, but so far have had no luck.”

“These people weren’t professionals; they were barely a step above teenage vandals,” Sherlock sneered. “It’s likely that one of them will eventually boast about their exploits and it’ll turn up on someone’s blog somewhere.”

“Likely, yes. I think it would be wise for you two to consider implementing some form of security, especially when you travel together. I can see to that, if you wish.”

“No, you’re quite gleeful enough just sending your forensic minions,” Sherlock said. “Irene will arrange for our security if we decide that it’s warranted.”

“Very well.” Mycroft pulled out a pocket watch and checked the time. “I’d best be off, then.”

“You just got here!” John said. “I haven’t even had the chance to tease embarrassing stories about Sherlock out of you.”

Mycroft laughed out loud. “Another time, perhaps. Although that tale about the pet bunny and the tennis racket is quite priceless.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t want to besmirch your honour in front of your beloved.”

“You’d like nothing better.”

Mycroft rose to his feet, Sherlock and John following suit. John noted with some amusement that Mycroft was slightly taller, and that Sherlock seemed to be standing with unusually straight posture, as if to maximize his own height. Mycroft glanced around at the living room. “The Findleys certainly went the extra mile with the décor, didn’t they?”

“They did,” Sherlock said. “It was very kind of them.”

“Pity you don’t have a Christmas tree. But then, there’s time.” He turned to John. “It was lovely to
meet you, John. I must thank you for what you’ve done for my brother. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him happier.”

John glanced at Sherlock, who looked anything but happy at the moment. “He’s done the same for me,” John said, shaking Mycroft’s hand again.

“Good day, Sherlock. I’ll be in touch.”

Sherlock just nodded. “I am awash with anticipation. Take care, Mycroft. Don’t drive into any ditches or anything.”

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him, then left, shutting the door behind him. John turned to Sherlock. “He didn’t seem as bad as all that.”

“Be his younger brother for thirty-four years and then get back to me.”


“There’s bread for toast, and eggs in the fridge. The coffee should still be hot.”

John went into the kitchen and poured coffee, then put some bread in the toaster. He was waiting for it to pop up when Sherlock came up behind him and slid his arms around John’s waist. Sherlock bent his head and kissed John’s neck, over and over, small, light kisses that made John shiver with anticipation of where the next one might land. Then he suddenly hugged John back against his chest, and pressed his face into John’s shoulder with a low growl. “Oi, what’s all this?” John said, raising one hand to the back of Sherlock’s head.

“I don’t know,” Sherlock said, his voice muffled against John’s skin. “I’m suddenly compelled to latch on to you.”

John turned around in Sherlock’s arms so he could look up at him. “That’s understandable, after the week we’ve just had.”

Sherlock was looking right into John’s eyes, his gaze a bit raw. He looked vulnerable in a way that Sherlock rarely allowed. “Don’t ever leave me, John,” he whispered.

John shook his head. “No, never. I won’t ever.” He wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s shoulders and held him. They stood in the kitchen, hugging each other tight, for a long time. The toast popped up, unnoticed, and grew cold.

It took three whole days for Sherlock and John to start getting bored in the house by themselves. They’d watched all their movies, had their fill of strolls on the property, and discovered that there was a limit to how many times they could have sex in a day. So on their fourth day, they set out for Hailsham to pick up a few things and grab a bite at the pub. It was dark by the time they set out for home. They had been walking in companionable silence for a good fifteen minutes when Sherlock broke the quiet with a low chuckle. “What’s funny?” John asked.

“You are, my love. That’s the fourth time since we left the village that you’ve looked around at your surroundings with a deep sigh, as if marveling at your own good fortune.”

“Maybe I am. Look at this! It’s Christmastime, there’s a picturesque snow falling, and I’m walking in the moonlight with the handsomest man in Britain, who I will take to bed within the hour.”

“You are a ridiculous person, you know that?” Sherlock reached out and twined their fingers
together. “You’re right, of course. It is all a bit absurdly idyllic. Although I take issue with one of your assertions.”

“Which one?”

“I believe it is I who am walking with the handsomest man in Britain.”

John felt himself blushing. He elbowed Sherlock in the side. “Shut it, you.” He sighed in contentment and pulled Sherlock a bit closer. “Sydney’s starting to seem far away.”

“Agreed.”

John looked up at Sherlock—his cheeks were rosy with the cold and his breath puffed out of his mouth, and John thought he’d never looked more beautiful. “Our film’s a critical and financial success. We went public and the world didn’t end. We got through it.”

Sherlock nodded. “We did.”

“And now it’s our first Christmas together,” John said, grinning. “That feels like a milestone, don’t you think?”

“If you wish it to be one.”

John shook his head. “You’re such a stick in the mud sometimes.”

“Don’t misunderstand me, John. I’m aware that Christmas is a day of some significance to most people, so it’s natural that you’d place extra emphasis on it. But to me, every day with you is a milestone. Christmas Day will just be one more.”

John stopped and pulled Sherlock around to face him. “It astonishes me that I ever thought you cold and unfeeling,” he said, hanging onto both his hands.

Sherlock shrugged. “I’m sure I seem so to everyone else.”

“That’s because they don’t know you like I do.”

“No one’s ever been permitted to know me like you do.”

“Why, Sherlock? Why me?” The question had been on the tip of his tongue many times.

Sherlock thought for a moment, his gaze on John’s face. “I honestly don’t know. I couldn’t say why you are special, John. I only know that you are. I could theorize that it’s because you are talented, intelligent, pleasant, and attractive to look at, but I have known other people who also fit that description.” Sherlock’s face softened a touch, and he lifted one hand to brush snowflakes out of John’s fringe. “I’ve looked for a rational explanation. What I’ve found is that….” He hesitated, then smiled a bit shyly. “Love resists being rationalized.”

Happy warmth bloomed in John’s chest. “And that must drive you round the bend, I bet.”

“It used to. Eventually I had to accept that I love you, I shall never understand why, and it doesn’t matter. The fact of it is enough.”

John took hold of Sherlock’s lapels and pulled him down. Sherlock smiled, his eyes flicking to John’s lips, and he leaned closer for the expected kiss. John grinned, kissed the tip of Sherlock’s nose, and darted away. “You’re it!” he yelled, seized by an unexpected rush of buoyant glee. He took off down the trail, the cold air rushing into his lungs, the blood heating his cheeks.
He heard Sherlock curse and run after him. “This is absurd!” John heard him say.

John ran into the yard behind the house. He turned and waited, and when Sherlock emerged from the trees he let fly. The snowball hit Sherlock in the chest. He skidded to a halt and looked down at himself, eyes wide in surprise. “Ha ha! That’s got him!” John cried.

“What the bloody hell?” Sherlock said.

John scooped up another snowball and hurled it at him, striking him right in the face. He whooped and jumped up and down as Sherlock spluttered.

“All right, Watson,” he grumbled, bending to gather his own snowball. “If this is how you want it.” John tried to feint right, but somehow Sherlock anticipated it. He lobbed a graceful throw and it hit John in the neck. Icy snow spilled down inside his shirt collar.

“Gah! Shit, that’s bloody cold!” John bent to get another snowball, but just as he straightened up again, another missile struck him in the forehead.

“I’ll have you know I was a much sought-after cricket bowler at school,” Sherlock said, patting another snowball.

“I was in the Army. I shot guns.”

Sherlock shrugged. “All right, I suppose that trumps.” He cocked his arm to throw the snowball. John ducked, but the hit never came. He looked up to find that Sherlock had faked the throw and used John’s distraction to run at him. He tackled John to the ground and mashed the snowball into his face.

“Christ, Sherlock, it’s up my nose!” John said, grabbing snow in both hands and thrusting it at Sherlock’s face. They rolled over and over, stuffing snow down each other’s collars and cackling like little kids until John ended up on top, straddling Sherlock’s waist with a fresh handful of snow. He hesitated, looking down at Sherlock, red-faced and wet and laughing with snow in his eyelashes and the moonlight reflected in his eyes, and John flashed back to their screen test, not even a year ago. That Sherlock had been rigid and unyielding, somber and preoccupied. The Sherlock he’d known in the early days of the shoot had been arrogant and impatient, caring only about the work, dismissing John as insignificant with a contemptuous glance. That man bore little resemblance to this one, the one he thought of as his Sherlock. Had this Sherlock been within him all along, but never let out to play? Or was this Sherlock someone new, someone brought into being by the novel experience of a relationship with someone he actually loved?

How easily it could have gone wrong. If John had taken the Soderberg film instead, if the film itself had gone badly, if a different director had been at the reins, if any of a million things had been different, they might both still be as they had been, and right now, at this very moment, John would be alone in his house, unaware of how close he had come to the love of his life, only to miss him by a hair’s breadth.

“All right, let me up, my back’s gone wet, I’m getting mmmmph….” Sherlock’s words were cut off when John bent and kissed him. He couldn’t stop, he just kept at him until Sherlock’s lips parted beneath his; he kissed him until they were both out of breath. “My goodness, John,” Sherlock finally said.

John popped to his feet and hauled Sherlock to his. “Let’s get inside, we’re soaked.”

They chased each other into the house. The fire in the living-room fireplace was banked; John
crouched by the hearth and stoked it, urging it into a blaze once again. Sherlock stripped off his wet coat and let it fall to the floor, then knelt by John’s side and pulled his damp jacket off him, tossing it aside and bending to kiss John’s bared neck. They clawed at their wet clothes, stripping them off each other, toeing off shoes and sending them flying into corners, chuckling into each other’s mouths until they finally got each other naked. John’s cold, snow-wet skin rippled up into gooseflesh until the fire and Sherlock’s hands warmed it.

“God, I want you,” John whispered against Sherlock’s skin. “I want you all the time.”

“You can have me, anytime,” Sherlock murmured. He bore John down to the rug and slid down his body; he pressed hid legs apart and descended on his cock with abandon, taking him all in with one swift swallow. John groaned and stared down at Sherlock’s curly head, past the curve of his back to the delicious swell of his arse beyond. He’d grown so accustomed to the feel and the look of Sherlock’s body that he could hardly remember what he used to find pleasing about women’s bodies. Where he used to picture soft breasts and curves, now he could only imagine a flat, broad chest and narrow hips. Had he ever actually gone to bed with people who did not have cocks? Seemed downright unnatural.

The thought made him chuckle. Sherlock lifted his head and smirked at him. “Glad I amuse you.”

“Come here,” John said, beckoning him. Sherlock crawled up John’s chest and settled over him, their bodies slotting comfortably together. “I was just thinking about having sex with you.”

Sherlock arched one eyebrow. “I could be wrong, but I thought we’d progressed well beyond the ‘thinking about it’ stage this evening.” He pressed forward and kissed him. “You seem to have a bit more intent than just idle speculation.”

“Mmm,” John said, kissing him back and easing him over to his back, shifting on top of him. “Which I believe I ought to demonstrate by shagging you into the floor.”

“Promises, promises,” Sherlock purred.

They snogged in front of the fire for a few minutes, sweat rising to their skins from their contact and the fire’s heat, their hands and mouths all over each other. When at last John sank into Sherlock’s body, all he knew was this felt right, more right than any sex he’d ever had, and that with this man, it couldn’t feel otherwise.

After staggering upstairs, they stumbled into bed and drew the covers up. John felt Sherlock reach for his mobile as he curled around him, the chill in the bedroom driving him towards body heat. “Christ, I’ve got twenty messages,” he muttered. Then John felt him tense up. “John, what day is it?”

“The fifteenth.” As soon as he said it, he knew. His head popped up. “Sherlock, the nominations!” They’d been relishing the novel experience of being away from the Hollywood machine—John hadn’t checked his email in days—but even so, he couldn’t believe they’d let the SAG and Golden Globe nomination announcements slip by them. Sherlock was already looking them up on his phone. John watched his face.

“SAGs first. To a Stranger, Outstanding Performance by a Cast.”

John clapped. “Yay!”

“Nominations for Male Actor….” His brows furrowed in a scowl, which probably didn’t mean good news.
“Oh,” John said. “We weren’t nominated?”

Sherlock sighed. “I was.”

“But that’s great!” John kissed his neck. “You deserve it.”

“You ought to be nominated. This is pure inertia. They’re all blinded by the date movies. Snobbery run amok.”

John refrained from pointing out that Sherlock’s own snobbery had colored much of their early interactions. “I’m fine with it, Sherlock.”


John’s mouth fell open. He’d known it was possible; he’d known that the talk was that he’d be nominated, but to hear it said and know that it was true...that was something else. *I am a Golden Globe nominee,* he thought. *Fuck me.* “Oh, my God.”

Sherlock grinned and pulled him into a hug. “Congratulations. I’m sure there’s never been a more deserving nominee.”

“I didn’t think I’d feel like this about it,” John said, hugging him back.

“It is a very rewarding sensation to be recognized for one’s work.”

“Congratulations to you, too, sweetheart,” John said, planting a big, wet kiss on his mouth. “I’ll be honored to be your arm candy at the SAGs.”

Sherlock chuckled. “I don’t have the best history with them. Two previous nominations and no wins.”

“Well, if you don’t win, I will take you home and present you with the award for Best Performance in My Bed and invite you to favor me with as many repeat performances as you like.”

Sherlock looked at him, bemused, then just shook his head. “John, sometimes I marvel that you are real.”

“The box office is very good,” John said, seated at the kitchen island while he scanned the numbers on his laptop.

“Oh?”

“Second weekend dropoff was only thirty percent. Word of mouth must be strong. It’ll likely break $100 million before the new year.”

“I imagine that the nominations will help with that.”

“Irene says every press outlet and blog has asked for reactions from us.”

“Hmm.” Sherlock was at the stove doing something involving orange zest and cinnamon sticks. John was sitting at the kitchen island, on his laptop. “Perhaps they’ll finally stop asking about Sydney.”

“Everyone wants to know how we feel about the fact that I was not nominated for a SAG, and how
it feels to be competing with each other for the Globes, and all that mess.”

“I assume she’s already sent ‘our’ responses,” Sherlock said. John could hear the smirk in his voice.

“Oh, naturally. I’m happy for your SAG nomination, you’re honored but disappointed that I was not nominated, we’re jovial and jokey about competing and there’s some sort of comment about how if one of us wins the other’s going to make him do all the dishes for a month.” John snorted. “As if you do any of the dishes now.” He craned his neck, trying to peer around Sherlock. “What are you doing, anyway?”

“I am making mulled wine. It’s a bit of a Christmas tradition in the Holmes family.”

“I wasn’t aware that the Holmes family had Christmas traditions.”

“Well, most of them involve stony silence, enforced togetherness, and disappointing gifts, so they’re best forgotten, but I do enjoy the mulled wine, especially as a balm for the enforced togetherness.” Sherlock unscrewed the cap off one of the four bottles of wine waiting on the sideboard.

“Hmm. Screw-top. Classy.”

“Good heavens, you don’t use good wine for mulling. I’m about to dump a load of sugar into it and then heat it.” He upended the bottle and gave it a swirl; the wine flowed out into the copper pot. “It makes the house smell quite lovely.”

“Is this part of a scheme to get me drunk in the middle of the afternoon?”

“Of course not. I’m insulted by the very idea that I’d attempt to compromise your faculties so as to take advantage of you, John.” That smirk was back in his voice.

“Well, if it is, you needn’t bother. I’m a sure thing.” John went back to his inbox. “Loads of congratulatory emails. And Irene’s hinting that we ought to come back to the States sooner rather than later.”

“I hope your reply was in the spirit of ‘no sodding way.’”

“Well put.” They were quiet for a moment. The smell of cinnamon and sweet wine began to fill the kitchen as Sherlock stirred the pot. “That does smell lovely.” John hummed “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” under his breath. “Scenic snowfall, festively decorated house, now mulled wine. It’s like The Sherlock and John Holiday Special.”

“Good God, what a revolting thought. You’ll have me looking for hidden cameras in case Irene is arranging for a reality show.”

John laughed. “If she is, we’ll have given her some rather adult-only footage by now.” He glanced at Sherlock’s back, then cleared his throat. “Got an email from Charlie.”

“Your brother?” Sherlock’s voice was carefully neutral. He knew what was coming.

“Yes. About Christmas Eve.”

“John….”

“I really want you to come.” Sherlock said nothing. “I mean it.”

“I know you do.”
“But you still won’t.”

“I can’t see that it’ll do anything but make matters worse.”

“I don’t care if it does make it worse. You’re the person I’ve chosen, I want you to meet my family, and I want them to meet you. It’s only my parents who are being arseholes about it. And who knows? Perhaps meeting you will make them see reason.”

“Please, John. It’ll only turn an abstraction into cold, harsh reality. Their son is fucking another man, and oh, look, here he is in their house, shoving his way into a sacred family tradition. If they don’t hate me now, they certainly will if I come with you. I would like to meet your brothers and your other sister, but I don’t see why we can’t arrange to get together with them some other time.”

“Because our relationship isn’t inferior,” John said, his temper rising. “You shouldn’t be relegated to second-tier gatherings. My brothers have wives, my sister has a husband, and they will all be there. You should be, too.”

“I’m not your husband.”

“You will be.” Sherlock turned and met his eyes. “Won’t you? Someday?”

Sherlock raked a hand through his hair. “We haven’t talked about that in some time.”

“Nothing’s changed.”

“Oh, John, everything’s changed. Our careers may go belly-up; the world will never stop putting us under a microscope.”

“Nothing’s changed between us, unless it’s that I love you even more now than I did when first I asked you that question.” Sherlock blinked, holding John’s gaze. “It doesn’t matter if it’s formalized or if we’re wearing each other’s rings. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Is that what you want?”

Sherlock sighed. “Yes. Of course, yes.”

“You are no less my partner than my brothers’ wives or my sister’s husband. That’s how I think of you, and that’s how my parents should see you. They’re just going to have to get used to it. I think that once you’re there, and they see my brothers and sisters welcoming you, and see that you’re not normal person and that you love me, they’ll start to realize that they’re the outliers. When the rest of the family doesn’t rally to their side, they won’t last long. I know them. They’re posturing and having a strop and it will end.”

“Or, they will see me as a toff interloper who’s corrupted their darling boy, not to mention ruined his career, and your relationship with them will never recover.”

John opened his mouth to rebut, but his mobile rang. “Oh. Speaking of, it’s Charlie.” He picked up the phone. “Oi, you wanker.”

“Johnny! How’s Sussex?”

“Bloody marvelous. This Christmas snow is making everything look like a postcard. We’re only short a tree, and I think we might be able to scrounge one up.”

“You get my email about Christmas Eve? You’re still coming, right?”
John sighed. “Yes, I’m coming.”

“And what about Sherlock? Last time we spoke he weren’t too keen.”

“It’s not that he isn’t keen, Charlie, it’s….”

“I know, Mum and Dad. Is he there?”

“Yeah, he’s right here.”

“Put me on loud speaker, will you?”

John looked up at Sherlock. “My brother would like to have a word with you.” He set the phone on the island and touched the speaker key. “Go ahead, Charlie.”

“Sherlock, you there?”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “Yes, hello, Mr. Watson.”

“Oi, leave off with that Mr. Watson rubbish. It’s Charlie, got it?”

“All right then, Charlie.”

“Johnny says you’re having some doubts about coming up for Christmas.”

“It isn’t that I don’t want to come, it’s just that I fear making things worse.”

“I got that. I wish I could make our Mum and Dad see some common sense, but I ain’t that talented.”

“Charlie,” John cut in, “Dad said some things about me not being around the boys.”

“Yeah, I think we’ve just about talked ‘im out of that bollocks. You know none of us think that, John.”

“I know, I know.”

“He’s just got wrong ideas. You know where he got ‘em, it’s just his generation. We’ve been having some talks ‘bout that.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“Look, Sherlock. Our dad’s not in the best way and I’m the oldest so I reckon I’m more or less head of the family now, even if Johnny there’s the one what’s loaded.” John smiled. “So here it is. You are coming for Christmas, and I won’t hear no different. I won’t have my brother kept from the family because our parents can’t get their heads outta their arses.”

“There’s never been any question of John going,” Sherlock said. “He wouldn’t be kept from….”

“That’s not what I meant. Johnny says you and him are in it for life, is that right?”

Sherlock hesitated. “Yes. Yes, we are.”

“Then you’re my brother, too. And no brother of mine’s going to be made to feel unwelcome, not while I’m around, got that?”

Sherlock blinked hard and swallowed, then nodded. “Well, all right, then. I suppose I’ve got my orders.”
Charlie laughed. “See, you’re getting the hang of it, now! Anyway, my Isabelle’s bloody foaming at the mouth to meet you and I don’t want to be on the bad side of her in one of her strops. Good. That’s settled. We’ll be seeing you both at Mum and Dad’s on Christmas Eve. Good to talk to you, Sherlock. I’ll be glad to meet you.”

“And I you, Charlie.”

“You two take some time and relax. Dunno how you’re not both barking mad with all the shit you’ve been through.”

“Sometimes I think we are,” John said. “We’ll take that advice, Charlie. Ta.” They hung up. John met Sherlock’s eyes. “I guess he told you, didn’t he?”

Sherlock shook his head. “I still think this is a bad idea. But I suppose it isn’t my place to refuse a directive from the heir apparent.”

John laughed. “The heir apparent is a mechanic with a passion for the Stone Roses who’s going deaf in one ear.”

“He seems to be a good sort of man, your brother.”

“He is,” John said. “He’s rough and crass and short-tempered at times, but you’ll never know a better man. He’d do anything for anybody he cares about. The chaps who work in his shop worship him and his kids love him. So do I. And he just gave me another big reason to do so.”

“John, make it stop,” Sherlock groaned, curling into a tighter ball in the passenger seat and hugging his knees to his chest.

“I told you not to have that third piece of banoffee pie.”

“But it was so good.”

“I know it was good. My sister is a cracking cook, but with as little as you normally eat, three pieces of banoffee pie on top of two hot toddies, two glasses of wine, and a full Christmas dinner was going to give you a stomachache.”

Sherlock gave another groan. “Food is vile. I’m never eating again.”

John glanced over at him, a little tenderness creeping into his expression. He reached out and touched Sherlock’s cheek. “It’ll pass soon, and then you’ll be asking if we have any crisps.”

“Oh, God! Not crisps!”

“Or just one mint. It is wafer-thin!” John said, giggling.

“Don’t say mint! Don’t say the names of any food at all. I demand this.”

John laughed at him a bit more, and then they fell silent. Sherlock watched John at the wheel to distract himself from his gurgling stomach. He enjoyed watching John drive; he did it so competently, and with such calm confidence. Watching John do anything with confidence was becoming a bit of a hobby of Sherlock’s. He supposed it had started when he’d seen John so skillfully act the Big Scene. Whether it was cooking, or driving, or boxing at the gym, watching John in action was one of Sherlock’s favorite things to do.

His stomach was settling. “Your brothers and sisters were…enthusiastic.”
“Bit overboard, weren’t they? They just wanted us to know they’re okay with it.”

“There’s such a thing as going too far in the other direction. None of the children seemed to care at all. Well, except Liam.”

John sighed. “Poor Liam. I ought to spend some time with him, just us.”

“Is there a story there?”

“Not really. He’s always idolized me, more so than the others. Charlie tells me that he brags about me to his mates, his uncle the big-time film star. He’s just twelve, and at that age everything starts to become about what is and isn’t manly, and learning how to be masculine, and the most important thing in the world is what your mates think. Charlie said he’s been getting some crap at school about me being…well….”

“A poofter?”

“I think he feels betrayed. He doesn’t know how to act. It isn’t his fault; he’s just a kid. He’ll come round.”

“Isabelle’s rather keen, isn’t she?”

“Oh, she’s a smart one, all right. Our agent on the inside.”

They were quiet for a few more minutes. Sherlock shifted a bit, working his mind around to something he knew he had to say. “John, I’m sorry. About what happened at dinner.”

John sighed. “You’re not the one who needs to apologize.”

“I knew going in that your father might say unkind things to me, so I was prepared for it. I wasn’t prepared for how I’d feel when he said unkind things to you. He’s welcome to say what he likes to me, I don’t care. But I couldn’t sit there and listen to him malign you without speaking up.”

John reached out and took his hand. “I know.”

“It was never my wish to ruin the family dinner.”

“You ruined nothing. You sat back down, Dad shut the hell up, and we all went on with life. If it makes you feel better, Peter came to me later and said he was impressed. He said he wished he had the guts to confront Dad like that. He was so intimidating, all our lives, none of us ever really had the gumption to face up to him.”

“It’s different when it’s your father.”

John hesitated. “What about yours?”

“What about him?”

“Were you afraid of him?”

“Terrified. Until the day I realized I was much smarter than he was. Not coincidentally, that was the day he rather stopped liking me.”

“How old were you?”

“Five.”
John snorted a disbelieving laugh. “Five. Christ, Sherlock.” He lifted Sherlock’s hand to his mouth and kissed the knuckles.

“Your dad got me alone later. Wanted to chat.”

“What?” John said, alarmed. “When was that?”

“I stepped out for a moment. Just needed a bit of quiet. You were playing video games with Michael and Luke. Your dad joined me on the porch.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now. No point interrupting the holiday.”

“Oh, God, what did he say to you?”

Sherlock sighed. “He said that no one’d ever dared speak to him like that in his own house. I said—quite reasonably, I think—that I wouldn’t stand by and let you be treated like that in a house you paid for.”

“Jesus. Sherlock, I…”

“Shush, John. Let me finish. Then he…well, he laughed.”

“He…he laughed?”

“As I live and breathe. He told me I had some bollocks on me, and that he was glad that at least I wasn’t one of those limp-wristed shirt-lifters. His words, not mine.”

John abruptly pulled onto the shoulder, parked the car and turned to face him. “Sorry, I just don’t think I ought to be driving when I hear this. Then what?”

“I told him that he’d had his little strop, and you’d indulged him, but that if he and your mother wish to continue to have contact with you, they’d best start dealing with it.”

“That’s just about exactly what I told Mum.”

“Well, apparently my bollocks don’t buy me much influence, because he said he’d deal with it as he saw fit. Then he went back into the house.”

John shook his head. “Just a glimmer of hope is all I’m asking for right now. I don’t ask that they do an instant turnaround. He couldn’t have talked to me instead of you?”

“He can’t talk to you about it yet, John. It’s too raw. He can’t trust himself. I suppose we ought to be thankful he said as much to me.”

“At least you impressed him, for whatever good that’ll do.” John put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road.

Sherlock groaned as his stomach gave another unhappy heave. “I shall never eat banoffee pie again.”

John clucked. “Shall we stop somewhere and get you some ginger tea?”

The concern in John’s voice made him smile. “No, I’ll just suffer through.”

“Oh, of course. More fun to play the martyr.”
“Much. And then I may benefit from your caretaking for a little while longer.”

“Please tell me I do not sense any doctor/patient role-playing in our future.”

“Now there’s an idea.”

“Oh God, now I’ve done it.”

Sherlock sighed and let his eyes fall shut for a moment, his mind masticating—to use John’s word for it—on the cornucopia of new data he had about John’s family. Meeting so many people at once was always exhausting for him; he couldn’t help but read their life stories, and he had to concentrate to maintain his focus on what they were actually saying to him.

He couldn’t imagine growing up in a family of five children. He knew that the number was not particularly excessive, but as he was one of only two children, it seemed like a throng. Among John’s four siblings, their three collective spouses, and their assorted children, it had been a populous gathering. Harry had been the only Watson not to bring someone.

“Harry didn’t bring Clara,” he said.

“No, she did not,” John said, his tone speaking volumes.

“I might have thought she’d speak up a bit in solidarity.” John didn’t say anything. “She hasn’t told them yet, has she?”

“I suppose it’s easier to hide it when you’re not being tracked by Perez Hilton.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how to feel about that. I can’t tell her how to live, or what to do. I can’t imagine my parents’ reaction if they found out that two of their children are in same-sex relationships.”

“They wouldn’t react to her as they did to you.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s already the black sheep. She’s thirty-six, she’s not married, she’s unlikely to have children, and she’s an alcoholic. Being a lesbian would just be one more strike. You, on the other hand. You’re the golden child. You’re a decorated war hero and a world-famous actor worth millions who’s always dated beautiful women and supported the whole family while allowing them to live vicariously through your fabulous lifestyle.”

“Oh, yes. My fabulous lifestyle. Making scrambled eggs on a Friday night in front of the telly.”

“You know what I mean. You had further to fall.”

“My relationship with you is not a fall.”

“They’d see it that way. No, it’s all very clear. All of them worship you. Your younger brother went into the military hoping to be like you.”

John sighed. “Peter has his own reasons.”

“You worry about him, don’t you?”

“Of course I worry. He’s just back from the Middle East and he’ll be off there again in a few months. And Leigh’s got their kids to deal with all on her own. You saw her, she looks like she’s at the end of her tether, and somehow, he doesn’t see it.” He sighed. “I’ve half a mind to hire some help for her.”
“She wants to ask you for help to pay for childcare assistance, but she can’t find the courage.”

John frowned. “How do you know that?”

“It’s obvious. She’s ashamed, as if it reflects badly on her as a woman and a mother.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous as it may be, she may never ask. We’ll just have to take matters in hand.”

John glanced at him, smiling. “We?”

“Yes, of course. Your problems are my problems too.”

They passed the rest of the drive quietly. By the time they reached the house, Sherlock’s stomach had more or less quieted, but he still felt unpleasantly full and unexpectedly grimy, as if all the excess sugar was coming out of his pores. He and John carted their gifts and leftovers into the house, dumping the whole lot in the kitchen before shuffling upstairs to the bedroom. “I’m for a shower,” Sherlock said. John nodded and said something that might have been ‘okay,’ but it was half-lost in a massive yawn.

By the time Sherlock emerged, John was in bed with the covers curled around him, eyes shut. Sherlock climbed in beside him, moving gingerly in case he was asleep. He was just about to put out the light when John spoke. “D’you want to have sex?”

Sherlock had to chuckle at the words, so drawn-out and muddled with fatigue that he could barely understand them. “I think you’re done in. As am I, actually. Let’s just get some sleep, shall we?”

“‘Kay.”

Sherlock put out the light and settled back. John scooted closer and put his head on Sherlock’s shoulder. “Love you,” he murmured, halfway to sleep.

“You, too.” Sherlock kissed John’s forehead. He felt the fatigue of the day as well, but he suspected he’d have trouble falling asleep. Not only had the day given him much to ponder, but he was starting to feel nervous anticipation about the gift he would be giving John in the morning. They had both put their gifts under the little tabletop tree John had insisted they buy in Hailsham. A few small boxes, a few gifts in the stockings, but Sherlock knew that they each had a gift of some significance for the other. He’d seen the eagerness on John’s face when he’d placed a particular flat package under the tree, and he’d felt it himself when he’d put out the small box he had for John.

Sherlock knew that for most people Christmas was not just about anticipating what one was to receive, but also what one was to give. He’d never had a Christmas like this one; he’d never had anyone to share such holidays with. He’d spent all previous Christmases in his own home, or working, or else sitting in the awkward company of his brother and mother. The gifts he’d given them had been purely a matter of routine, and the ones he’d given Greg and his other staff had been (he was embarrassed to admit) selected by Sally. She’d even chosen her own gift because he couldn’t be bothered.

But now he had just spent a balls-out family-chaos holiday with the Watson clan, with all the excitement and affection and family strife that films and telly would have him believe were the norm, and in the morning he’d spend Christmas with a man he was deeply in love with, and he would give him something he’d spent considerable energy choosing. It hadn’t been an easy decision.

Material things seemed inadequate. Jewelry was right out. John didn’t wear decorative jewelry, and
Sherlock refused to buy him any sort of ring except the sort that comes with vows attached, and it was not yet time for that. An extravagant purchase like a vehicle felt smarmy. He’d considered giving him a trip, but they already had tentative plans to do some traveling once awards season was over—whenever it ended for them—if their schedules permitted.

All hand-wringing aside, he was happy with what he’d eventually chosen. He couldn’t wait to see John’s face when he opened it.

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I must have been a very, very good boy this year.

John smiled to himself at the cliché, but it was true. His karma must be extra-shiny these days for him to deserve to wake up on Christmas morning in a bucolic country house in Sussex with a gorgeous lover shagging his brains out.

He pushed on Sherlock’s shoulders and managed to flip them both over without disengaging, then settled into Sherlock’s lap with a groan of pleasure. “Oh, yeah, that’s it,” he sighed. Sherlock tossed his head back and grabbed at John’s hips; John let his head droop forward as he shut his eyes, concentrating on the sensation, on Sherlock inside him, on the slow tidal motion of his own hips and the practiced ease of their lovemaking. They’d been good together from the start, fortunately, but in the months since then they had found their groove. Sherlock could read in John’s movements how he wanted Sherlock to respond, and John knew by the tension in Sherlock’s body how close he was.

He bent forward over Sherlock’s chest and kissed him. Sherlock braced his feet, cradling John’s hips against his thighs, and wrapped his arms around him. Their kisses grew harder and deeper as Sherlock hit that spot inside John over and over, driving every thought from his mind save one, Sherlock Sherlock Sherlock. John hissed in a quick breath, feeling the flush rise to his chest and face.

“John,” he whispered. He reached between them and stroked John’s cock with a practiced hand, and John went off like a booster rocket.

“Christ,” he gasped, burying his face in Sherlock’s damp, warm neck, spilling between them as the orgasm washed over his whole body with a shuddery flash. He went limp in Sherlock’s arms and could do nothing but lie there and breathe while Sherlock thrust into him, faster, harder, until he finally came into John’s body with a bitten-off cry of his own.

They lay there catching their breath for a moment. John wiggled back against Sherlock’s sated cock, still tucked inside him. Sherlock chuckled. “Was that the wake-up you wanted?”

John propped up on one elbow. “Perfect.” He kissed Sherlock again, taking his time about it. “Happy Christmas, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sighed, his eyes full of the emotion that John knew was still strange to him. He wondered if Sherlock would ever get used to it. “Yes, it is,” he said. “A very happy Christmas.”

They stayed where they were and snogged for awhile, no intention of taking it further, just enjoying the closeness. John looked up at one point and his eyes widened. “Sherlock! Look!”

Sherlock twisted and sat up a little, looking where John was indicating. “Hmm. Looks like we have someone’s blessing, anyway.”

John grinned out the bedroom window at the sight of a gentle snowfall. The shrubs were frosted like cupcakes, and the world looked serene and perfect. “I wish we could stay here forever,” John blurted out. He blinked, not quite sure where that had come from.

Sherlock met his eyes. “We could, you know.”
John considered that for a moment. “What, stay here and never be seen again?”

“How not?”

“Because we’d get bored and kill each other.”

Sherlock chuckled. “You’re probably right. In that case, we’d better get out of bed and see if Father Christmas came.”

They made it downstairs in a tumble of pajama-finding and quick tooth-cleanings. “Oh, drat. Still just the presents we already put there,” John said, eyeing their little tabletop tree.

“Perhaps we weren’t such good boys after all,” Sherlock purred into his ear, one hand sliding south to cup John’s arse.

John giggled and gave him a shove. “Breakfast before presents. That was the rule at our house. Never in their lives have five children eaten porridge faster.” He went into the kitchen to make toast and coffee. Sherlock wandered off, and in a few moments the sound of Christmas music filled the house from Sherlock’s iPod speakers. John recognized George Winston playing “The Holly and the Ivy.” “That’s my favorite carol,” he said.

“I know. That’s why I put it on my playlist. Are you still surprised that I know these things about you?”

“Not surprised. Just pleased.”

John spread butter and jam on their toast and walked carefully into the living room, balancing two plates on one arm with two mugs of coffee held in his other hand. Sherlock relieved him of half his burden, exchanging his plate and mug for a kiss, which John gladly bestowed.

John munched on his toast, looking around at the decorated house and the twinkly lights on the little tree. “This really is quite nice,” he said. “And that Irving Berlin snowfall is just the topper, isn’t it?”

“I’m rather more enthusiastic about the fantastic orgasm you gave me just now, actually.”

“So you’re not dreaming of a white christmas?” John teased him.

“Oh, it’s pleasant enough. But if it were disgustingly foggy and rainy, I’d still be here with you, and that’s all I care about.”

John shook his head. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Turn one of your annoying cerebral spasms into a charmingly backwards expression of affection.”

Sherlock laughed. “It’s a skill that I’ve had to develop so as to avoid you stomping off in a huff on a regular basis.”

John finished his last bite of toast. “Presents now!” he exclaimed, jumping up. Sherlock quickly swallowed his last mouthful of coffee and joined him at the tree. “All right, this one’s for you, and this one, and this one…and I’ll just keep this one till the end.” He tucked the special present into the pocket of his dressing gown with a little smile.

“Funny, I have a for-last present for you, too,” Sherlock said, secreting a slim box in his own pocket. “But these first.”
They set about opening their gifts, taking turns. John got a cashmere jumper in a lovely shade of blue, Sherlock got a new wallet. John got a tie pin engraved with his initials, Sherlock got a vintage copy of *Mother Night*, signed by Vonnegut. They opened the chocolates, the woolen hats, the new driving gloves, and the monogrammed luggage tags until only the Presents of Significance remained.

They sat and stared at each other. “You go first,” John said, holding out the package.

Sherlock looked as though he were debating whether he should insist that John go first, but then he took the package and tore the wrapping off. John had to sit on his hands, he was so excited. Sherlock seemed to take forever opening the box and the layers of tissue, but finally he lifted out a flat black envelope, embossed with a raised seal. “John, I…” John saw his eyes widen as he read the words on the seal. “What is this?”

John grinned, unable to contain himself any longer. “I set up and funded a charitable foundation in your name that will provide a full scholarship to one student each year from SFSA and from LaGuardia. It’s a fully-licensed charity, so you can make further contributions yourself or put out the word for donations. It’s completely funded for the first two years. Two students each year who couldn’t have afforded it can go to film school or drama school.”

Sherlock was gaping at him, mouth open. Of all the astonishing things that had happened to John in the last few months, the sight of Sherlock speechless had to be near the top of the list. “John…I don’t know what to say.” He opened up the flat envelope and stared down at the Holmes Foundation documents for a moment, then tossed the papers aside and lunged across the sofa at John. He hugged him hard, then pulled back and kissed him. “Thank you. My God. It’s the most perfect gift anyone could ever….” He shook his head. “You really thought about this, didn’t you?”

“I did. I wanted to get you something that would have meaning.”

“It does, God, it does.” Sherlock beamed a wide, happy smile. “I’m overwhelmed.” He kissed him again. “No one’s ever…. I just…. He took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

John blinked hard. Sherlock’s reaction was all he could have hoped for. He was alight with excitement and seemed bowled over that John had gone to the trouble (and it had, in fact, been quite a lot of trouble) to set it all up. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you like it.”

Sherlock gave him a mischievous smile and drew the small package from his pocket. “I believe it’s your turn now, Mr. Watson.”

John took the package, deadly curious about what it could be. He opened the wrapping and lifted the box’s lid to find—a pen. “Oh,” he said, trying to sound enthusiastic. It wasn’t even a particularly fancy pen. A nice pen, but an ordinary pen. “It’s a…pen.” He looked for an inscription or something, trying to be subtle about it, but there didn’t seem to be one. “I’m…it’s a pen,” he repeated.

Sherlock grinned. “Relax, John. I didn’t get you a sodding pen for Christmas. But you will be needing it to sign these,” he said, pulling out a sheaf of papers with a flourish from where he’d hidden them behind one of the couch cushions. He handed them over.

John put the pen aside and began to read them. It was the deed to a house. His eyes widened as he realized that it was the deed to *this* house. It was newly printed, and at the bottom of the signature page were the names of the owners. Sherlock Holmes, and…John Watson. “Sherlock, what…it’s the deed to this house.”

“It’s our house now, John.”
“You…what did you do?”

“I asked my brother to relinquish his half-ownership of this house and sign it over to you.”

“And he just did it?”

“I can be very persuasive.”

John cocked an eyebrow. “Sherlock, you bought him out of his half, didn’t you?”

Sherlock sighed. “All right, yes, I did.”

“I can’t believe this. We own this house? Together?”

“As soon as we’ve both signed these papers, we do.” Sherlock took the papers from him. “You wouldn’t happen to have a pen handy, would you?” he asked, smirking.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” John laughed, and handed him the ridiculous pen. He watched as Sherlock signed his name and then handed him the papers. “This is beyond….,” He couldn’t finish; he just signed the deed. “Sherlock, you must let me pay for my half.”

“What sort of a Christmas gift requires the recipient to reimburse the giver?”

“But this isn’t a leather jacket or a new balaclava, it’s a house!”

“Yes, John. The house were we became us. It ought to be ours, our home, a place where we can always escape to. And I want to give it to you.”

John stared down at the title, tears blurring his eyes. “Our home,” he said. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“Why not?”

John looked up at him. “Oh, no, it’s not…it’s not that I can’t, it’s that I’m amazed that you did.” He leaned forward and kissed him. “Thank you,” he whispered against his lips.

He felt Sherlock’s lips curl in a smile. “Happy Christmas, John.”

“Happy Christmas. The first of many.”

“Not many.”

“Hmm?”

“The rest. We’ll have the rest of our Christmases together. Won’t we?”

John drew back so he could see Sherlock’s eyes. “Quite right,” he said. Jumpers and tie-pins were nice, and half ownership of this house was mind-boggling, but nothing could ever come compare to what Sherlock had already given him.
“Hurry up, show’s starting!” Sally called from the den.

Harry hurried back, refilled popcorn bowl in hand. Sally lifted the afghan to let her sit down, then they covered back up. “Oh my God, what is Angie wearing? She needs to get away from the drapey Roman-priestess look, it is done like a really done thing.”

“At least Brad shaved. I was starting to worry that he was sheltering a flock of small, flightless birds,” Sally said.

“For God’s sake, these people pay their stylists a gajillion dollars, and this is the best they can come up with? I could do better!”

“You know what we sound like, don’t you?”

“Bitter Hollywood nobodies?”

“Got it in one.”

“Well, that’s what we are, isn’t it?” Harry’s phone trilled; she fished it out of her pocket. “Text message from Irene. She says they’re thirty seconds out, so the boys’ll be on the red carpet in a few minutes.”

“And then, let the wild rumpus begin.”

They were quiet for a moment. “Do you think one of them will win?” Harry said.

Sally sighed. “I’ve been going back and forth all day. Moriarty’s got a lot of support.”

“John took the New York and the Chicago Film Critics’ Circle’s top honors. That has to count for something.”

“But he got shut out of a SAG nomination. People are wondering why.”

“Nobody wants to talk about why, because the coming-out factor is always the elephant in the room.”

“It didn’t hurt Sherlock.”

“No, but remember what Greg said? It’d be harder on John than on Sherlock?”

Sally nudged her. “Shh, here they are.”

On the screen, the crowds were waving and cheering as John and Sherlock appeared on the red carpet, hand in hand. Flashbulb saturation immediately doubled. They walked down the red carpet past the phalanx of photographers, pausing every few steps to pose for photos. They smiled and waved, hanging on to each other, until they made their way to the first of many interviews. The reporter, some entertainment-channel floozy with giant white Chiclet teeth, grinned into her camera. “I’m standing here with trailblazing power couple Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, both of whom
are nominees here tonight for Best Actor. Any tension at home over that?” she said, chuckling.

Sally snorted. “‘Trailblazing power couple.’ Something tells me that isn’t the last time we’re going to hear that.”

“No, not at all,” John was saying. “We’re not in competition. It’s up to the Hollywood Foreign Press who wins.”

“Sherlock, you’re a two-time nominee here at the Golden Globes, but you’ve never won the prize. What would it mean to you to win here tonight?”

Sherlock wasn’t bothering to conceal his annoyance at having to answer inane questions. John’s expression was blandly pleasant, but Harry could tell by the set of his jaw that he was squeezing Sherlock’s fingers hard to keep him from blurting something too terribly snotty. “It would be an honor, of course,” Sherlock said, flatly. “This film has been important to both of us, and we’re hoping it will be recognized. Whether that leads to individual honors for us is less of a concern.”

“Thank you, Sherlock and John, and best of luck tonight.”

They both nodded and moved off as quickly as possible. Harry shrugged. “At least he didn’t tell her to stuff it.”

“He was thinking it.” Sally shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth. “Well, now we wait.”

They watched the rest of the red carpet, snarking on everyone’s clothes, until the commercial break before the ceremony started. Harry’s phone rang; she answered and immediately put it on speaker. “Did you survive the gauntlet?” she said.

“Barely,” Irene said. “I’ve made my escape to the press lounge. I had to rugby-tackle someone from *Variety* to get this nice table in the corner. How’d the boys look?”

“All right. John was amiable, Sherlock looked like he was being forced through a garlic press.”

“So they looked normal.”

“More or less.”

“I had to scramble to keep them from bumping into Moriarty in front of the press. That could have been awkward.”

“He is just desperately in love with the sound of his own voice, isn’t he?” Sally said. “He babbled about his craft and his motivation until the reporter had to practically shove him away.”

“Yeah, he’s a douche-canoe, but I think he’s going to win this award tonight. Shit, I gotta go wrangle some reporters. I’ll call you back.” The line went dead.

“You think he’ll win?” Harry said. “Moriarty, I mean.”

Sally shrugged. “He shouldn’t.”

“Fuck no, he shouldn’t. John should win.”

“Hold up, there! Let’s not discount *my* employer.”

“Sherlock’s fantastic in the film, but John…” Harry trailed off. “He needs to win.”
Sally frowned. “Why? I mean, besides the obvious.”

Harry sighed. “Forget I said anything.”

“No, what’s going on? Is it that you need him to win?” Harry just sat there, trying to keep her face neutral, but she couldn’t have been doing a very good job because Sally’s eyes widened. “Oh. I see.”

“What? What’re you talking about?”

“You didn’t think he could handle this role, did you?”

She grit her teeth. “He’s my brother. I have total confidence in him.”

“Liar.”

Harry looked over at her. “All right, I had my doubts. But I didn’t know! Nobody knew! I knew he was a good actor, but…Christ, I never knew he was that good. He’d never had a chance to show it. But I should have known. I should never have doubted him.”

“And if he wins, then it’ll take a bit of the sting out, is that it?”

“I know, that makes no sense. Anyway, John doesn’t know any of this, so don’t you tell him.”

“I won’t.”

They settled in to watch the awards. Irene came back on the line shortly after the ceremony started and the three of them kept up a running commentary on everyone’s attire, speechmaking ability, and general worth as human beings. They agreed that the hosting left something to be desired, and that the cameramen had been directed to get as many shots of John and Sherlock at their table as possible. They were sitting with the rest of the contingent from *To a Stranger*: Ang and his wife; Molly; Emma Hudson (who was presenting); James Schamus; and Andrew Bird, who was nominated for his score.

One of the commercial bumper shots caught John and Sherlock sitting side by side at their table, looking for all the world like bored travelers waiting for their flight to be called. “They have Actor Face on,” Sally said.

“Which face?”

“Actor Face. You know, that expression they all wear when they’re in public and they don’t want anybody to know what they’re thinking or feeling. I don’t know how you’d describe Actor Face but I know it when I see it.”

Harry cocked her head. “Hmm. I think I’d call it ‘wearily pensive’.”

“‘Casually thoughtful’?”

“How about…‘inoffensively resigned’?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty close.” A quick camera shot between award presentations showed them again; this time Sherlock’s arm was stretched out over the back of John’s chair. They both still had Actor Face, but then John looked over at Sherlock and for just an instant the face slipped, and Harry saw a quick moment of affection pass between them. Then it was over and they both looked ‘wearily pensive’ again.

Sally sighed. “Have you ever been in love like that? Like they are?”
“Thought I was, a couple of times. But then it always ended, and I’d realize that the person in that relationship wasn’t me, but some version of me that I thought they wanted or would like better.”

“Too right.”

“What about you?”

Sally shrugged. “Never had the time, or really the inclination.”

“What about David?”

“What about him?”

Harry snorted. “Guess that answers that question.”

“Well, what about Clara?”

Harry went quiet. “I’m very fond of Clara.”

“My, how…pleasant.”

“I know,” Harry said, wrinkling her nose. “We haven’t been able to cobble together enough days in a row in each other’s company to figure out how we feel. I don’t love her. But maybe I could.” She drew up her feet and tucked the afghan closer around her legs. “Sometimes, seeing John so happy with such an unlikely person—I know it sounds trite, but it makes me think anything might be possible.”

Sally nodded. “Maybe.” As the broadcast resumed, the bumper shot caught Tom Hanks talking to John and Sherlock at their table. “Cor, look at that. A blessing from on high.”

“Shh, this is one of ours,” Harry said, flapping a hand at her.

They cheered Molly’s win for her screenplay, then Andrew’s win for his score. They grabbed each other and cheered even louder when Ang won for Best Director.

“Christ, this is it,” Harry said, when Scarlett began reading the nominees for Best Actor in a Film, Drama. She and Sally were clutching each other’s hands like teenage girls watching a horror film. “God, please let him win. At least let one of them win.”

The camera lighted on each nominee in turn. John looked like the picture of calm stoicism, while Sherlock looked like he’d cheerfully trade places with any given prisoner in solitary confinement.

“And the Golden Globe goes to…”

*John Watson, John Watson, John Watson…*

“James Moriarty!”

“OH, FUCK THAT!” Sally shouted.

Harry’s heart sank. The audience was applauding as Moriarty rose to accept his award. The camera clicked over to John and Sherlock. They exchanged a sort of “oh, well” look, both of them politely applauding. “Well, shit,” she muttered.

“That is bloody highway robbery!”
Moriarty was now at the podium, babbling his acceptance speech in typically pompous fashion. “God, that insufferable bastard.”

“He’ll be even more insufferable now that he’s Mr. Oscar Favorite.”

“How did he win this? Almost none of the critics put him on top. Mostly it was John or Sherlock, with a few odd men out going for Jean or George.”

“The critics aren’t the best arbiter of one’s Oscar chances and you know it.”

“This bloody well sinks John for an Oscar, especially without a SAG nomination.”

“Let’s just hope that git doesn’t win the SAG, too. If Sherlock wins, at least it’s still a little bit open for debate.”

“God, what if John doesn’t even get nominated?”

Sally got up to get a refill. “Oh, he will. I don’t think there’s any question. Beyond that? Fuck if I know.”

John and Sherlock kept a low profile at the after-party. After making the requisite rounds of hugs and congratulatory chit-chat, they’d gotten themselves drinks and retreated to a quiet spot. It wasn’t long before Schamus found them. He set the Best Picture statuette on the table and looked at each of them in turn. “One of you guys should have one of these,” he said.

“We’re just glad the film did so well tonight,” John said.

“Your performances were so much better than his.”

Sherlock sat forward a little. “Do you think the result was influenced by our relationship?”

Jim shrugged. “I’d hate to think so. But some people might be wondering if the whole thing was engineered to draw attention to the film.”

“That rumor just refuses to die, doesn’t it?” John said, gritting his teeth.

“How can it die, with a certain newly-minted Golden Globe winner resuscitating it every time it threatens to expire?” Sherlock sneered. “He does love to make the insinuation.”

“What do we have to do?” John asked. “Get off with each other on the red carpet for people to believe it’s not a publicity stunt?”

“That would probably only fan the flames,” James said. He shook his head with a rueful smile. “No pun intended.”

John got up. “I’m for a drink. Sherlock?”

“I’m fine.”

He headed off to order something strong, hoping he didn’t get waylaid too many times. He made it all the way to the bar and ordered a vodka tonic before he felt a hand on his arm. He turned, ready to give a polite brush-off, but couldn’t help but smile when he saw who it was. “Natalie, how are you?” he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “How’s that new little chap of yours?” The bartender handed him his cocktail.
She beamed. “He’s wonderful. Starting to crawl, getting into everything. John, I just had to tell you how much I loved your film,” she said.

“Thank you; that’s nice to hear. We’re very proud of it.”

She glanced around, then leaned in a little closer. “I hope I don’t have to smile and act happy while I hand Jim Moriarty an Oscar next month,” she said, sotto voce. “Not sure I’ve got that performance in me.”

“At this point I think he has to be considered the favorite. We’ll see how the SAGs shake out.”

“You deserved that award tonight, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Good Lord, of course I don’t mind. Go ahead and say it again if you like.”

She laughed. “We can’t have you getting a big ego.”

“Never fear. Sherlock’s got ego enough for the both of us.” Natalie grinned and she saw her eyes cut past his shoulder. “Bollocks, he’s right behind me, isn’t he?” John turned to find Sherlock looking down at him from beneath arched eyebrows. “Oh, don’t you dare look insulted.”

“Who said I was insulted? If I’ve such an enormous ego, perhaps it’s your own fault.”

“How is it my fault?”

“Anyone who’d managed to secure the affections of the eminently desirable John Watson might be justified in the size of their ego, I daresay.”

“Awww,” Natalie said.

John flushed and shook his head. “I don’t know how he does that. He’ll take some irritating personality quirk of his own and turn it into a compliment to me so I can’t possibly keep being annoyed.” He noted that Natalie was looking at Sherlock with frank curiosity. “I’m sorry, have you two met? Sherlock, this is Natalie.”

They shook hands. “We haven’t met,” Natalie said. “I’m a big fan, though.”

“Likewise. Your accolades of last year were richly deserved, although I confess I preferred your work in V for Vendetta.”

She grinned. “I loved working on that film. Honestly, I was excited to have an excuse to shave my head. I’d always wanted to try it.”

“So have I, actually,” Sherlock said.

John’s eyes snapped wide. “Don’t you dare!” The thought of Sherlock’s glorious curls shorn off hardly bore contemplation.

“Oh, dear. Have I touched a nerve?” Sherlock said, his eyes twinkling.

A smartly but unobtrusively dressed woman (probably her publicist) appeared and murmured in Natalie’s ear. Natalie nodded, then turned back to them. “I have to go, but it was so good to see you, John.” She clasped his hand and kissed his cheek. “And to meet you, Sherlock.”

“Good to see you, too,” John said. They watched her disappear with a wave. John turned back to Sherlock and sipped his drink. “Why’d you lie?” he said from behind a placid smile.
“Hmm?”

“I seem to recall you pronouncing *Black Swan* ‘predictable and overrated’ and her performance ‘histrionic and one-note’. It isn’t like you to engage in empty flattery.”

Sherlock sighed. “I meant what I said about *V for Vendetta*, at least.”

“Sherlock….”

“She needed a moment so I gave her one.” His eyes flicked over towards the doors. John looked and saw a photographer, sitting half in shadow, his camera still pointing in their direction. “She wanted to be photographed talking to us, so I gave her a nice, smiley photo-op. No harm, really.”

John’s heart sank. “I had no idea. I thought Natalie was a friend.”

“Don’t be daft, John, of course she is. Her affection for you is quite sincere. People are capable of having more than one motive at a time. Her desire to congratulate you and her admiration for the film and your performance are genuine. If she also wanted some documented face time with us – the current column-inch champions – then that’s show business.”

John looked around the crowd, noticing for the first time how many people were watching them surreptitiously, gauging their availability, timing their approaches, weighing the options. “Will I ever be able to trust anyone again?” he murmured. “Except you, of course.”

“Oh, I’m the last person you ought to trust. I’m just using you for sex and publicity. Haven’t you heard?”

“Nice to hear you admit it, at least,” came a voice from behind them.

John saw Sherlock shut his eyes for a moment. They both turned to face Moriarty, who was standing there with his Golden Globe in one hand. “James.”

“Hello, darling. Quite a night we’re having, isn’t it?” John saw Sherlock’s lip curl at the ‘darling’, and his own inner alpha-male sent up a bit of a warning flare at another man being quite so familiar.

“Have you let go of that thing for a moment?” Sherlock said.

Moriarty shrugged, glancing down at the statuette. “It just feels so comfortable in my hand, as if it had been made just for me,” he said, with an odd giggle. “Would you like to hold it?” He held it out. “As long as you promise to give it back!”

“No, thank you,” Sherlock said, looking down his nose as if Moriarty were offering him a tarantula.

“Oh, I’m sorry, you’re being rude. James Moriarty, we haven’t met,” he said to John, holding out a hand.

John shook it, mostly because he couldn’t come up with a reason not to fast enough. “John Watson.”

“Of course you are, of course you are. You know, Sherlock, you ought to be careful what you say. The walls have ears as well as eyes. We wouldn’t want more rumors going around about your high-profile romantic adventures.”

“You started half those rumors yourself,” Sherlock said.

Moriarty put on an exaggerated shocked face, gasping as one hand flew to his throat. “What a suggestion! That I’d do such a thing to an old friend.”
“We’re not friends, we never were.”

“Oh, no. It goes so much further than that.” John frowned, which Moriarty didn’t miss. His eyes twinkled with delight. “Don’t tell me he doesn’t know,” he said, tossing Sherlock a “you-naughty-boy” smirk.

“Doesn’t know what?” John said.

“Nothing. He’s winding you up.”

“Sherlock, you wound me. Did it mean so little to you?”

“It meant nothing to either of us,” Sherlock hissed.

John had heard enough. He grasped Sherlock by the upper arm. “Come on, Sherlock. I think we’ve stayed long enough for politeness.” Sherlock let John lead him away, but his furious gaze was still fixed back on Moriarty.

“See you next time, boys,” he said, waggling his fingers in a jaunty little wave.

John dragged Sherlock out of the party and to their car. They climbed into the back, and John toggled the button that raised the privacy screen as their driver pulled out of the parking lot.

“Want to tell me what that was all about?” John said, doing his best to keep his voice even while his guts were churning.

“Nothing. Ancient history.”

“You slept with him, didn’t you?” Sherlock’s silence was answer enough. “Christ. Were you ever going to mention this?”

“It isn’t important. It couldn’t be less important.”

“The hell it couldn’t. You’ve got history with him, and now he’s using it against us. That is my business, Sherlock, to say nothing of the fact that you’re my…whatever the hell you are, and I have a right to know these things!”

“You have a right, do you? Tell me, John, do I know every single thing about your past? Have you told me every detail of your history, every person you slept with, every mistake you made? No, nor should you have to. A relationship is not a deposition. There is no oath sworn between us to disclose all. I respect your right to some privacy, as you ought to respect mine.”

“Have I ever asked you anything you weren’t comfortable answering?”

Sherlock sighed. “No.”

“This came up on its own, and now Moriarty’s using it to try to drive a wedge between us. I won’t let him do that. I don’t care what your history is with him, but I’d rather not be blindsided by it, and I want you to feel like you can talk to me about it.”

His gaze fixed out the window, Sherlock reached out blindly for John’s hand. John grasped it and squeezed. “I didn’t want you to think less of me,” he said, quietly.

“I couldn’t,” John said. “I love you.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. “He was a year ahead of me at RADA,” Sherlock said. “He
had a reputation for being exceedingly ambitious and cunning, just as I had one for being able to see through people at a glance. I know now that he saw me as a challenge. I’d been an object of romantic designs to a few of my classmates, but I had little interest in meaningless dormitory liaisons. He set his sights on me because I was supposedly unattainable, I let him succeed…well, because I was bored and, I admit, a little curious. We both thought we were playing the other. I soon discovered that being with him was even more tiresome than being bored, and I called it off. This was an unpleasant surprise to him, because he’d been hoping to exploit our connection to worm his way into a production I was organizing with our most sought-after director. He never forgave me for not being the easy mark he took me for. That might have been the end of it, if he hadn’t later tried to get me expelled when I exposed his unsavory methods of furthering his career. He’s a gutter snake and I find it offensive that his name is even mentioned in the same sentence as yours.”

John ran his thumb over the backs of Sherlock’s knuckles. “I knew there had to be more to it than you’d told me.”

“He hates that I eventually saw through him, I hate that he fooled me. And now I hate that he took this award tonight that ought to have been yours.”

“You deserved it just as much.”

“Maybe. But I wanted it for you. I want this bloody business to admit that they were all wrong about you, John.”

“I don’t care about their admiration. It’s enough to have earned your respect. You give it to so few people; I never thought I’d be one of them.”

Sherlock finally turned and met his eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before.”

“Accepted.”

The house was quiet, the lights darkened. They climbed the stairs in silence, fingers intertwined, listening to each other breathe.

Their bedroom closed around them. John turned around, his hands finding Sherlock unerringly in the dark, sliding up his chest to his shoulders. He felt Sherlock’s hands on his waist, his breath on his cheek, closer now, and then Sherlock’s lips against his. His mouth was soft and quiet, his kisses slow and deliberate. John slid his hands up and around Sherlock’s neck and stood on tiptoe to lean closer into the kiss. Sherlock pressed kisses to his cheeks, his jaw, around to the side of his neck. “John,” he murmured.

John held him tightly, arching his neck under Sherlock’s lips. “There’s never been anyone but you,” he whispered. “I want you to know that.”

“I know,” Sherlock said, the words muffled against the skin of John’s throat. “Nor for me. There was never even the dream, the hope of anyone else.” He sealed his lips over John’s and kissed him again, deep and languid. Warmth rose to John’s skin and pooled beneath his clothes as they kissed each other, laced together in the dark of the bedroom. “I could never have imagined you,” Sherlock said, the words hardly more than shaped breath.

John slid his hands under Sherlock’s coat and pushed it off his shoulders, down his arms until it fell to the floor. They undressed each other, unhurried; Sherlock’s touch was tender and reverent, as if he weren’t quite sure John wasn’t a mirage. Sensing Sherlock’s need, John went pliant and allowed him to do as he liked, to make love to John however he needed to. He wound himself around Sherlock,
caging him in his limbs, sighing as Sherlock pressed into him with a groan, the now-familiar sensation of their joining driving all other thought from his mind. Sherlock murmured in his ear as he stroked into him, little half-heard endearments, wordless susurrations that still managed to speak to John’s mind. John’s body suddenly leapt to meet Sherlock’s and he came without warning, a cry surprised from his throat. Sherlock kissed him hard and groaned out his own release, John’s name sounding like a confession on his lips. He fell into John’s embrace, spent and gasping. “John,” he said. “He was nothing. You are everything.”

“More screeners,” John called, kicking the back door shut. He put away the milk, then walked into the den, tossing the DVDs into a box. They’d been watching one or two a night for weeks. “So this is the exciting life of an Academy member,” John commented. “Buried in screeners.”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise from his reclining position on the sofa, his laptop open on his chest. “Next year we’ll get duplicates of everything because you’ll be a member by then.”

“That is by no mean certain.”

“They almost always invite nominees to join, especially ones as well-known as you.”

“Leaving aside that my nomination is not a foregone conclusion, they can invite whomever they like, and an actor known almost entirely for disposable date movies might not fit in with the august membership of the Academy.” His phone rang. “It’s Mike.” John wandered back into the kitchen. “Mike, hello.”

“Hi, John. I’m afraid I’ve got bad news.”

John’s heart sank. “The lawyer picture?”

“They’re withdrawing their offer. They’re going in a different direction.”

“A direction consisting of ‘any actor not named John Watson’, presumably.”

“Don’t overreact. This happens all the time.”

“It’s happening more than usual of late. Gosh, I wonder why.”

“I’ve got more irons in the fire here, John. It doesn’t matter.”

John sighed. “All right. Let me know.” He hung up and tossed his phone to the kitchen counter.

“John?” Sherlock called from the den.

“What?”

“While you’re out there…..”

“Yeah, tea, I know,” John said, tamping down irritation. He put the kettle on. Tea? John shook his head and went into the fridge for a beer instead. He’d finished it by the time the tea was done and stopped himself from getting another.

Sherlock looked up and frowned as John handed him his tea. “What’s wrong?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“It’s all over your face, and you just drank a beer at three o’clock in the afternoon.”
“Let me guess, you can tell from the amount of moisture on my lips or the slight flush on my cheeks, right?”

“Or because I heard you open the bottle and I can smell it on your breath. What is it?”

John flopped into a chair. “That courtroom-drama project fell through.”

Sherlock’s eyebrow arched. “Fell through?”

“Yes, they’ve decided to ‘go another direction’,” John said, making air-quotes with his fingers. “On top of that, I was supposed to get a script from Darabont, and suddenly no one in his office has any idea what Mike’s talking about when he asks.” He rubbed a hand through his hair. “I suppose I’m too old to learn a new trade. Will you still love me if I’m forced to sell my body on a street corner?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, it won’t come to that. In the worst-case scenario you’ll be a kept man, and it’d be my honor to keep you.”

“That isn’t especially reassuring when faced with the disintegration of my career.”

“Projects come and go. It’s the nature of our profession.”

“I think we both know that isn’t the problem. That’s three projects I was being considered for that have suddenly gone up in smoke with no explanation. That is not a coincidence.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

“I don’t need to jump at all, the conclusions are right bloody in front of me.”

“It hasn’t been happening to me.”

“You’re not on the market. And we always knew this would be worse for me than for you. Hard to be an Everyman when all the flyover audiences are imagining me going down on you.”

“It’s temporary. You’re going to win an Oscar and they’ll all be lining up, begging you to take their projects.”

“That is ridiculously optimistic, and frankly, it sounds bizarre coming from you.”

“It isn’t optimism, it’s certainty. You are too good an actor to be brushed aside.”

John couldn’t help but smile. “Your faith in me is…encouraging.”

“Don’t insult me. Faith is a belief without empirical support. My assessment of your career prospects is based on evidence and reality, not wishful thinking.”

“You almost have me believing it.”

“You may do so. Count on it. I, as you know, am never wrong.”

“Except when you said I’d win the Golden Globe.”

“I believe I said that you deserved to win, which you did. The idiocy of the Hollywood Foreign Press doesn’t affect the fact that I am still right.”

John squinted at him. “You’re being freakishly cheery about this. What’s going on?”
“What makes you think something is going on?”

“I’ve met you. Something is going on.”

“I fear some of my suspicious nature may be rubbing off on you.”

“Don’t give me that, what’s going on with you?” Sherlock studiously avoided his gaze, and just like that, John knew. “Sherlock, how many times must I tell you that whatever happens to my career now is not your fault? I won’t have you blaming yourself.”

Sherlock hesitated a moment before answering. “What makes you think I am blaming myself?”

“Because you’re overcompensating. Stop it.”

He met John’s eyes briefly, then returned his attention to his laptop. “If our relationship has adverse consequences for you, then it is unavoidably my fault, your protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.”

“If there are consequences, I’ll accept them. Doesn’t mean I’ll be thrilled about it, but given a choice between the career I had and being with you, then you win every time.”

Sherlock looked up, his face blank but his eyes gone a bit soft. “I hope that’s always the case, John.”

“It will be.” John might have said more, but the doorbell interrupted him. He sighed and got up to answer it, assuming it would be the UPS man or something. Instead, he found a messenger on the doorstep. “Delivery for Mr. Holmes,” he said.

“I’ll take it.” John signed for the delivery, a thick legal-sized envelope. He shut the door and checked the return address: Imagine Entertainment. John’s heart leapt. “Sherlock!” He hurried back into the den.

“What?”

“This came for you. Is it what I think it is?”

Sherlock stood up, tearing open the envelope. He withdrew a sheaf of papers, his eyes scanning the type—then he shut his eyes and his shoulders slumped. “It’s the contracts for the Tesla project.”

John grinned. “Well, what are you waiting for? Sign them!”

Sherlock grinned back, one of his rare, genuine smiles. “You know, I didn’t want to let myself believe it would really happen until I was holding these contracts. I suppose it’s safe to get excited now.” He sat down and laid out the contracts on the coffee table. John sat down next to him and looked over his shoulder. It was all there, the standard provisions and agreements, Sherlock’s salary and working schedule spelled out. His compensation was very generous, quite a bit above market for telefilms, which reflected Sherlock’s status in the pantheon of working actors. The document was initialed by Greg, indicating that he had reviewed it and approved the legalities on Sherlock’s behalf. There was a Post-It note stuck to the signatures page. We’re thrilled to have you on board for this project and I look forward to working with you. –RH

Sherlock met John’s eyes. “This project is going to take over my life this summer.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Last chance to raise any objections.”
“What objections would I raise? It’s a fantastic project and I can’t wait to see you in the period wardrobe. Would you sign it, already?”

Sherlock glanced from John’s face to the contracts, then picked up his pen and signed. He dropped the pen with a sigh. “Well, that’s done.”

John took Sherlock’s face in his hands and kissed him. “Congratulations. You’ll be brilliant.”

“You will be just as brilliant in whatever project is smart enough to sign you next.”

“You better call Irene. She’ll want to put out a press release.”

Sherlock got out his phone, but before he could dial, it rang in his hand. “Hello, Irene,” he said, thumbing on the speaker.

“Did you sign the contracts?”

“Just this very moment. How on Earth do you do that?”

“I’m watching you on closed-circuit cameras right now.”

“Ha ha.”

“You think I’m joking, don’t you? I’ve got a press release ready; do you want to review it first?”

“No need. I place my public image in your capable hands.”

“Such faith, I’m touched. Okay, John, about the courtroom drama.”

“It fell through.”

“You say that like you think I don’t already know. And I can hear you panicking from across town. Sherlock, is he panicking?”

“He’s working up to it.”

“Well, stop it. Panicking is not warranted. Not yet.”

“They were so keen to have me screen test, and now they want to go in a different direction?” John said.

“True, but it isn’t about you. From what I hear, they’re on the verge of signing a very big-name actress, and she is insisting that they hire one of only a short list of actors she’ll work with.”

“And why am I not on her list?”

“Well, it isn’t because you’re gay, because Bradley Cooper is on the list.”

“He’s not out.”

“He might as well be. I suspect it’s an age thing.”

“Oh! Fantastic! Now I’m losing parts because I’m gay and because I’m old! Smashing!”

“Sherlock, please whap him over the head with something. John, you’ve never been the vain, self-absorbed type of actor, and if you turn into one I’m going to have to kill you, slowly, and with pain. You are thirty-eight years old, a long way from aging out of the leading-man market, which is just
your good fortune for having been born with external gonads,” she said, a trace of bitterness lacing her voice. “Parts fall through, projects evolve, things don’t work out. You have been in the business long enough to know the score. You’re extra-paranoid because you’ve never experienced this level of public scrutiny, and you’re feeling invalidated by Moriarty’s win. If it helps, everyone thinks that award should have gone to you. This may actually give you a boost with Oscar voters. Being seen as the wronged underdog can mean more votes.”

John sighed. It did help. “You’re better than a therapist, Irene.”

“A good publicist is a therapist. Sherlock signing for a high-profile project will shut up a lot of naysayers and I have complete and total confidence that a good project for you is just around the corner.”

“As I have been trying to tell him,” Sherlock said. “Perhaps he’ll believe it coming from you.”

“At any rate, I don’t want you worrying about your next job right now,” Irene went on. “Let’s focus on getting through awards season first. The Oscar nominations….”

“No,” John said.

“I haven’t said anything!”

“You’re about to make another plea to let you film us watching the nomination announcement. Absolutely not.”

“But it could be fantastic!” Irene said. “It’ll help normalize your relationship, humanize you as people! I’ll only release the clip if you’re both nominated!”

“We are not going to become the Gay Actors’ Reality Show,” Sherlock sneered.

“Hey, you’re the ones who outed yourselves on a livestream!”

“We’ll watch the nominations here, in our home, by ourselves. If you’re a very, very good girl we might let you watch them with us via speakerphone.”

“Gee, I’m all aflutter,” Irene said, flatly.

“I have that effect on a lot of people,” Sherlock said, dropping a wink at John. “Leave us in peace, then.”

“Congratulations, Sherlock. On the Tesla project. It’s going to be fantastic.”

“I very much hope so.” He hung up. “Good God. How long until all this tomfoolery is over and done with?”

“Another month, or just about.”

“Can’t come soon enough.” Sherlock stretched out on the sofa again, reclaiming his laptop.

John stayed where he was, perched on the edge of the cushion, staring at his hands. He felt frazzled and uncertain, but he wasn’t sure what, if anything, to do about it. He looked around, wishing them back in Sussex, in their house. Five weeks away hadn’t been nearly enough. He missed the privacy, the calm, the intimacy of living there with Sherlock, like they were any other couple setting up housekeeping together, fighting over chores, puttering around the house, cooking and sleeping and talking about everything and nothing. Here, there was so much to deal with, all the time, never
ending – the press, their agents, the business, the rumor mill, the blogosphere, these bloody awards that meant so much to everyone.

“John?” Sherlock was frowning up at him. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m just….” He sighed, looking down at Sherlock, sprawled elegantly across the sofa. “I don’t know.”

Sherlock set his laptop on the floor at his side and held out one arm. John smiled. Sherlock could always tel when John needed a cuddle. John stretched out next to him, tucking himself between Sherlock’s body and the back of the couch and nestling his head down on Sherlock’s shoulder. Long arms encircled him and he felt a kiss pressed to his forehead. His eyes fell shut, and his body began to relax.

As John lay there, feeling the stress of the day bleed out of him as Sherlock’s warmth diffused through him, he wondered how he’d ever managed to navigate life alone, and hoped fervently that he’d never have to do so again.

Sherlock was already awake at five a.m., while John was, predictably, dead to the world. When the phone rang, Sherlock reached across him and put the it on speaker. “Good morning, Irene.”

John struggled awake, lifting his head from the pillow. “Do you have any idea what fucking time it is?”

“It’s five o’clock!” Irene crowed. “Get up! Why aren’t you up? It’s time!”

“It is not time, it will not be time for a half hour.”

“Make some coffee! Get downstairs!”

Sherlock pulled the phone closer, away from John, who was still muttering in irritation. “Irene, we are going to watch the nominations from right here in this bed and not move from it between now and then, nor for a good while after. Call us back at five thirty.” He hung up. “For God’s sake. She’s on Rockstar again, isn’t she?”

“The ‘again’ implies that she was ever off it,” John said, sliding back down into the bedclothes. He turned and looked at Sherlock’s face. “We’ll never get back to sleep now.”

“I wasn’t sleeping in the first place.”

“How long have you been awake?”

“Half an hour or so.”

John rubbed a hand over his sleep-muddled face. He was mussed and bleary-eyed and Sherlock thought he looked absolutely adorable, although he wouldn’t have said so. “What’ve you been doing? Just lying here?”

“I am never just doing anything, as you well know.”

John yawned. “You were listening to your brain, weren’t you?”

“Crudely put, but yes.”

“What is it saying this morning?”
“That I’ll have to cut my hair short for Tesla. That there are at least two dozen ways to murder Jim Moriarty so that I’d never be caught. That it might be time for some renovations on the house in Sussex. That you’re a better actor than I will ever be. That Greg is waiting for the right moment to spring another period piece on me that he thinks I ought to do.”

John was giving him a lazy, flirty smile. “Say that again?”

“About the period piece?”

“Before that.”

Sherlock smiled, reached out and ruffled John’s fringe with one finger. “You heard me.”

John shifted closer and kissed him, slow and warm. “We’ve got twenty-six minutes to kill.”

“Shall we play cards, then?”

“We could lie here and have a snog.”

“Acceptable.”

In the end, those twenty-six minutes were filled with a combination of snogging, breaks for the loo, one phone call each from their respective assistants, more snogging, and a few minutes of dozy near-sleep. When Irene called again, they were more or less awake.

“Do you have it on? Turn on your TV!” Irene screeched.

“Good God, how many Rockstars is that so far, then?” Sherlock said, sitting up in bed and reaching for the remote. He put on E!, where the host was babbling to fill up the time until the nomination announcements began. John scooted up in the bed and tucked himself into Sherlock’s side, leaning his head against Sherlock’s shoulder. He was warm and pliant; Sherlock wrapped one arm around him, sensing the anticipation beginning to thrum through him. The same anticipation was sizzling up and down Sherlock’s own nerves, but to his surprise, he found that he honestly did not care if he himself were nominated, or if he won. He cared only about John. Such unselfish thoughts were still strange to him, having spent his whole life thinking of himself and caring only about that which affected him and his work.

His happiness is more important to me than my own, the stray thought floated across his mind. He suspected that such a sentiment might constitute one possible definition of being in love. “You’re going to be nominated, you know,” he said, quietly.

“I wish I could be as confident. You’re a lock.”

“Nothing’s ever a lock, you know that.”

On the screen, AMPAS president Tom Sherak and actress Amy Adams were coming to the podium. “Oh, it’s Amy,” John said. “I didn’t know she’d gotten roped into this. I’ve not seen her since last summer. We did that Pixar film together.”

“John, shush!” Irene said.

“We’re not up for a few minutes!” he said, indignant.

They watched as the first nominees were read off. John clapped and cheered when Sarah was nominated for Best Supporting Actress. The Supporting Actor and Best Actress nominations flew by in a blur, and then it was time for their category. Sherlock felt another little shiver of anxiety run down his back. John reached out and took his hand.
“I think I’m going to puke,” Irene groaned.

Amy began to read the boilerplate language. “For Best Performance by an Actor In a Leading Role, the nominees are….”

“Here we go,” Sherlock murmured.

“George Clooney, in *The Descendants*. Jean Dujardin, in *The Artist*. Sherlock Holmes, in *To a Stranger*.”

Irene cheered. Hearing his own name barely made a ripple on the surface of Sherlock’s consciousness; all he could focus on was waiting to hear John’s.

“James Moriarty, in *For Which It Stands*, and John Watson, in *To a Stranger*.”

Relief and joy burst into Sherlock’s mind. He’d known, he’d *known* that John could not but be recognized for the extraordinary work he’d done. He knew that the very unexpectedness of John’s talent would make his peers want to reward him. The nation’s Greek chorus of critics had anointed him, almost unanimously, as the best actor of the year. And yet…coming up short to James Moriarty, of all people, at the Globes, and being entirely passed over for a SAG award—the mixed signals would drive anyone mad.

John had gone limp against Sherlock’s side. A rush of breath escaped him, his chest collapsing in its wake. “Bloody hell,” he wheezed. He was definitely not hearing Amy reading off the Best Director nominees.

Sherlock pulled him closer, chuckling. “I told you,” he said. “I told you that you’d be nominated.”

He kissed John’s temple.

Irene was—well, it sounded like she was having some sort of seizure. “—and the inquiries, everything will be routed through Bruno, and…John? John! Are you listening to me?”

Sherlock picked up the phone and thumbed off the speaker. “I’m afraid Mr. Watson is unavailable until further notice. Would you like to leave a message?” He stroked his free hand through John’s hair.

“This concerns you, too, Mr. Smartypants. I can be there within the hour, and we’ve got to—”

“We’ve got to do nothing at all until at least noon, and if I see you here before then, I’ll set the dogs on you.”

“You don’t have dogs!”

“We could have dogs.”

“Never mind about the dogs, this is unprecedented! Hollywood’s first openly gay A-list couple and you’re facing off on Oscar night?! You cannot buy press like this, Sherlock, and we are damn well going to take advantage of it. You guys need to be up and dressed and looking presentable, because everyone and their goddamned brother is going to want joint interviews and statements and photos and—”

“Irene, here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to hang up the phone, and you’re going to deal with all that press rubbish for us, because that is your job, for which we pay you an exorbitant fee. I am going to lie here in bed with my Oscar-nominated partner, and once he regains the use of his senses, we are going to have a great deal of Oscar-nominated sex. Clear? Goodbye!” He hung up,
cutting off Irene in mid-squawk. “Bloody hell,” he muttered.

“I’m nominated,” John said, barely louder than a whisper.

“Yes, my love, you most certainly are.” Sherlock picked up his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles.

“For an Oscar.”

“I know.”

“A real one.”

“I should hope it would be real.”

John was shaking his head. He looked up at Sherlock with still-disbelieving eyes. “I knew it could happen, I thought it might, but….” His mouth opened and shut a few times.

“I know what you mean. It isn’t quite real until you hear your name. My first nomination, all I could do was walk around my flat like a zombie for a good half hour. I must’ve rewound the recording of the announcement a half dozen times just to make extra sure that they’d really said my name.”

John’s eyes lit up. “Can we do that? Just to make sure?”

“Of course.” Sherlock picked up the remote and rewound the broadcast until they heard his name again. John Watson, in “To a Stranger.”


“They really what?”

“T ook me seriously.”

Sherlock’s heart clenched a little at how amazed John sounded. If he had his way, no one would ever think to take John anything but seriously, ever again. “As well they ought to,” he said.

“So we’re really going to… you know. Walk that carpet, and sit in that auditorium. We’ll be able to sit together, won’t we?”

Sherlock laughed. “Yes, of course.”

John smiled. “Good.” The stunned deer-in-the-headlights look was beginning to leave his eyes. He scrubbed a hand over his stubbled cheeks. “Christ almighty, did that just happen?”

“It did. You are John Watson, Oscar nominee.”

“And you are Sherlock Holmes, Oscar nominee.” John smirked. “But that’s old hat for you, isn’t it? That’s three now—no doubt it’s getting tiresome.”

“I think some things don’t really get old.”

“You don’t seem excited. About you, I mean.”

Sherlock looked into John’s face, glowing with excitement. “You want the truth?” He lifted a hand and carded his fingers through John’s hair. “I’ve barely thought about my own nomination. All I care
about is yours. This film might have resurrected my career, but it’s reinvented yours, and never has a
career been more deserving of a rebirth. I think of you toiling in those middlebrow workaday films
for ten, twenty more years and it turns my stomach. You deserve better, you are better, and our
profession, not to mention the public, deserves to enjoy your real gifts. I hope to hell I don’t win this
Oscar, because I want you to win it.”

John’s eyes were welling up. He leaned in and pulled Sherlock into his arms, rolling them over with
the duvet tangling around them. “You really mean all that, don’t you?”

Sherlock looked up at him and nodded. “Indeed, I do.” He shrugged, his lip curling in a smirk.
“Besides, I’ve already got an Oscar. It wouldn’t do to be greedy.”

John laughed and kissed him, hard and deep, not letting up until Sherlock was half-melted into the
mattress. John dove into Sherlock’s mouth and tipped his hips between Sherlock’s legs, pressing
down and rocking against him. Sherlock grabbed at John’s pajama bottoms, his tongue sliding into
John’s mouth, and after a few moments of flailing, they managed to get each other naked without
tearing anything or leaving any scratches. “On your knees,” John rasped, in the electrified tone he
only got when he was really turned on. He got when he was really turned on. Sherlock obeyed so fast that he almost went over the side of
the bed, kneeling low and spreading his thighs.

John dipped his head and licked a long stroke up Sherlock’s cleft. Sherlock groaned, his head
dropping down. John rolled Sherlock’s balls in one hand, keeping his other on the small of
Sherlock’s back as he worked him over with his tongue; Sherlock just kept still while shivers
wracked his body. “God, John,” Sherlock whispered. “Do it, do it now. I want you inside me.”

John scrambled for the lube and made quick work of the preparation. He was breathing fast;
Sherlock could feel the heat radiating off his body and see the deep flush rising to his pale skin. John
sank deep with a low grunt of satisfaction, his hands gripping Sherlock’s narrow hips.

Sherlock pressed back against him, lifting up a little to grab the headboard of their bed and brace
himself. He glanced back at John and his breath caught; John’s eyes were heavy-lidded with desire,
the muscles of his chest and arms standing out like he’d just done three rounds of circuit training.
“Yes, John,” he purred. “Fuck me.”

John bent low over Sherlock’s back and did just that. He let his face rest against Sherlock’s
shoulderblades and thrust wildly, barely in control of himself. John wrapped his arms around
Sherlock’s torso and worked his hips hard and fast; Sherlock wished there was some way for John to
hold him tighter, go deeper, get closer, because no matter how close they were, it never seemed close
enough. John grasped Sherlock’s erection and stroked him to the rhythm of their bodies, pressing
open-mouthed kisses to Sherlock’s back and shoulders wherever he could reach. Sherlock came with
a hoarse shout; the pulsing of his release pulled John over the edge and he spilled into him, gripping
Sherlock’s hips again, his body staggering and leaping and burying itself deeper still. Sherlock felt
John’s forehead come to rest against his spine as John sagged, wrung out. They stayed still for a
moment until Sherlock’s knees buckled and he pulled them both down to the bed in a tangle of
limbs. He turned over, found John’s mouth, and kissed him hard, breathy and haphazard, half-
muttered words and murmurings slipping from his lips.

Sherlock watched his lover’s face, both of them glowy and damp from sex, but when their eyes met,
instead of a moment of deep emotional connection…John burst out laughing.

Sherlock blinked. “John? I’m given to understand that the post-coital afterglow period is not
normally an occasion for mirth, or have I been incorrectly informed?”

“I’m sorry,” John said, still giggling. “I don’t know what’s come over me.” The double entendre set
him off again.

Sherlock smiled, starting to chuckle himself. “It’s the adrenaline.”

John kissed him between giggles, his hands all over Sherlock’s chest. “I half-expected Irene to ring us in the middle of it.”

“At least she would have a good answer for all those inane questions about how we’re reacting to our nominations.” Sherlock slipped into an American accent, doing his best imitation of Irene, which he knew was quite good. “‘John and Sherlock are thrilled to be nominated, in fact they’re fucking like crazed weasels right now.’”

That sent John into fresh peals of laughter again. “They’d love that over at People.”

Sherlock’s chuckles died down; he raised one hand to John’s cheek. “Professional acclaim must agree with you, John. That was a truly memorable shag.”

John grinned. “I’d like to thank the Academy.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Paul: WKRE Talk Radio, FM 88.5, you’re listening to Smash Cuts, your source for Hollywood news and gossip, and we live for dirt so if you’ve got some, call the Enquirer and we’ll have to hear about it from them, because we’re broke and can’t pay you. I’m Paul, with me as always are Chazz and Gretchen.

Chazz: Yo.

Gretchen: And a pleasant good day to you.

Paul: It’s the end of our Week of Oscar here, so we’re finally going to talk about the most-discussed race on the ballot, the Best Actor race.

Chazz: I don’t think there’s much to talk about. Moriarty has this in the bag. Vegas had him as a two-to-one favorite after the Golden Globes, and after he won the SAG it went up to five-to-one.

Gretchen: It’s not about him, it’s about John and Sherlock.

Chazz: So they hooked up—it doesn’t mean that this award should be all about that.

Paul: I don’t think it is. A lot of people feel that John Watson deserves the Oscar.

Chazz: Then the question we should be asking is why Moriarty has been winning everything if Watson is such a favorite.

Gretchen: Just about every major critic’s award in the country went to John. People can’t help but wonder if his relationship with Sherlock is hurting him with voters.

Chazz: It isn’t as if Moriarty’s stealing these awards. He turned in a strong, courageous performance.

Gretchen: It was an obvious, accessible performance, and the critics tend to appreciate a subtler, more controlled approach. And John has the element of surprise. Nobody had any idea he had that kind of a performance in him.

Paul: I can honestly say that was the best acting I’ve seen in years, period.

Chazz: I agree that To a Stranger was a better movie. But it’s a smaller, less showy movie. We know that isn’t always what gets rewarded by the Academy.

Gretchen: It’s a little puzzling to me that no one’s talking about the other contenders for this award. Even Sherlock’s been all but forgotten in the orgy over Watson.

Paul: Leaving aside their performances, it’s strange that a studio would put two actors from the same film up for Best Actor. Conventional wisdom holds that they’ll split the vote and neither of them will win.

Gretchen: Maybe that’s exactly what’s happening.
Chazz: Why would Focus put them both up, then?

Gretchen: I don’t know, but I know I’d have a hard time picking which one of them to knock down to Supporting. Agents may have been involved. Maybe it was a both-or-neither thing. Either way, it is true that Sherlock’s performance has been all but swallowed up by the buzz over John.

Paul: Well, Sherlock didn’t have that element of surprise. We already knew he was a good actor. Still, I thought he outdid himself this time. His performance was emotional in a way that he typically isn’t.

Chazz: You can’t help but wonder if that’s because he and Watson were basically falling in love while they made this movie.

Gretchen: According to them, they weren’t.

Chazz: That’s not what they said. They said they didn’t get together until last August, not that they hadn’t fallen in love.

Paul: Is that hurting both of them? Are they not getting credit for playing two characters who fall in love because people think they were just recreating their off-screen relationship?

Chazz: Yes.

Gretchen: Maybe, but they shouldn’t be faulted for that. Obviously their characters are different people having different experiences than the actors playing them. They both created original performances.

Paul: Now, it’s no secret that Moriarty and Holmes can’t stand each other.

Chazz: Oh, you think?

Paul: Last week on Leno, Moriarty all but accused them of fabricating this coming-out relationship drama to drum up interest in the movie.

Gretchen: I still can’t believe he said that.

Chazz: That wasn’t the first time he’s implied it, either.

Paul: Does anybody think that could really be true?

Gretchen: I don’t. No actor would fake a same-sex relationship for this long—

Chazz: Or at all.

Gretchen: Right, or at all, if it weren’t true. It’s way too risky and too potentially career-ending. The cost-benefit doesn’t work out. Besides, have you seen them together? I’d kill to have a man look at me the way they look at each other.

Chazz: I may vomit. Just so you know.

Paul: So what’s Moriarty’s game plan here? Is he trying to put off voters? Is it just sour grapes?

Gretchen: He’d have some nerve being sour about having won both of the major awards so far this season. He is the front-runner for the Oscar, even though Watson has stronger buzz.
Paul: And it may backfire. Watson’s lack of award recognition may give him that underdog vibe that makes people want to vote for him.

Chazz: Critical buzz isn’t the arbiter of Oscar, as we all know. The critics loved the performance, but the Academy has other standards and some serious prejudices.

Gretchen: Incomprehensible standards, some of which are the direct result of how much of the Academy is made up of old white guys.

Paul: Let’s not forget that there are two other contenders for the award. Who do you want to talk about first, Jean or George?

John stared at himself in the mirror, adjusting the waistband of his trousers. The ends of his silk bow tie were hanging loose, and the jacket of his brand-new tuxedo was on the valet stand. He’d put in some time choosing this tuxedo, given the enormity of the occasion. It was a classic tux, his usual preference, but with silk peaked lapels which lent it a little whimsy, not to mention some breadth to his shoulders. He’d need the confidence boost of a great tuxedo tonight—not only was he up for an Oscar, but he would be photographed countless times standing next to one of the most striking men in Hollywood.

The sense of unreality that had begun the morning of the nominations had not dissipated. It had deepened at the nominees’ luncheon, when he’d tried to act as if he were totally at ease in a room full of his more-prestigious colleagues, and hadn’t let up since. He sighed, his stomach rolling as the hour of their departure drew nearer. He met Sherlock’s eyes in their dressing-room mirror, and all at once the unreality was too much for him. “Fuck! I’m an Oscar nominee! I’m an Oscar nominee, and I’m going to be sitting the front row between Sherlock Holmes and Meryl-motherfucking-Streep.”

“Let it never be said that John Watson does anything halfway. At least neither of us has to sit next to Moriarty.”

John blew air through his teeth. “Suddenly I’m nervous.”

“Were you not nervous before?”

“Suddenly I’m really nervous.”

“Don’t be. Meryl is lovely.”

“God, how can you be so calm? You might win an Oscar tonight!”

“Unlikely, but if there is justice in the world, you will. Have you considered your speech?”

John shut his eyes. “No. Seemed like a jinx.”

“That is ridiculous. The identity of the winner will not be affected by whether or not you think about your speech.”

“I know that! God, are you being extra-Sherlocky tonight just to irritate me?” John pawed through his top drawer, frustrated. “Shit, where are my cuff links?”

“Which ones?”

“I only have one pair! Where are they? Dammit, I hardly ever wear them; they didn’t leap out of my drawer and scarper.”
“Try these.”

John turned and reflexively caught the small jewelry box that Sherlock had just lobbed at him. He frowned and opened it to reveal a pair of gleaming silver cuff links, engraved with an elegant geometric pattern. “Are these yours?”

“No. They are brand-new, as is patently obvious.”

“Are these…for me?”

Sherlock blinked. “Of course they are. Why would I have given them to you if they were for someone else?”

“They’re gorgeous!”

“Then they suit you.” Sherlock stepped close and plucked one of the cuff links out of the box, then lifted John’s wrist and began fastening his cuff with it. “I admit I was at a loss as to an appropriate gift for the occasion.”

“The Oscars?”

Sherlock glanced quickly up into his eyes, then away again. “Not exactly.”

“What occasion, then? Oh God, I haven’t forgotten an anniversary or something, have I?”

Sherlock smiled. “No. Take a closer look.”

John examined the other cuff link and saw that something else was woven into the engraved pattern. “Oh, there are numbers here. Roman numerals. What’s it say, it’s…seventeen-one-eleven. Is that….”

John looked up at Sherlock, his eyes widening. “That’s….”

“The day we met.” Sherlock looked rather embarrassed, probably at having been caught out in an expression of sentiment. “I hope that isn’t too…pedestrian.”

“It’s brilliant,” John said, keeping his eyes lowered; he was afraid he might lose it completely if he looked at Sherlock’s face right then.

“I’m afraid I’ve little experience with such things. I did some research, but it all seemed so ridiculous. Do people really hide jewelry in desserts, or at the bottom of wineglasses?” Sherlock took the cuff link, lifted John’s other wrist, then drew a few careful breaths before speaking again. “John, some time ago you asked me a question, and I said no.”

John nodded. “I remember.” His Oscar butterflies had been replaced by an entirely new species. He didn’t dare make any sudden movements; Sherlock had obviously been working up to this for some time and John didn’t want to distract him. Get to it, you clot, so I can say yes and we can start planning our honeymoon.

Sherlock finished with John’s cuff, but he didn’t release him—he just stood where he was, hanging on to both John’s hands with his eyes lowered. “I know that we’ve had something of an understanding—”

“An understanding? Are we in a Jane Austen novel?”

Sherlock flicked a withering glance at him. “Please, John. This isn’t easy for me.”

“Sorry.”
“What I mean to say is that despite whatever understanding we have, I thought—that is, it seemed it ought to be…. ” He broke off and gave a frustrated little head-shake. “How do people do this?” he muttered.

“Do what, exactly?” John strove to keep the smirk from his voice, not entirely successfully.

“You are not helping.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll be quiet.” John held on to Sherlock’s hands, fighting the smile that wanted to take over his face.

“I’m making a proper mess of this. I wanted it to be perfect.” Sherlock took another deep breath, then lifted his head and looked John right in the eyes. “John, I love you. Will you marry me?”

A great bubble of joy rose in John’s chest. He couldn’t do much but grin helplessly. Sherlock could be in no doubt as to his answer—he’d posed the question himself first, after all—but John still saw a trace of expectation and anxiety lurking behind his eyes. “Yes, of course I will.”

Sherlock grinned back, dropped John’s hands and pulled him into a hug. John wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s back and held him tightly. “Thank God,” Sherlock said into his ear.

“I love you, too, you know.”

John felt the tension leaving Sherlock’s body. “Ought I to have got down on one knee?” Sherlock said.

John laughed, drawing back. “In your tuxedo trousers? I think not.”

Sherlock was as close to giddy as he was capable of being, smiling and loose-limbed. “Here, help me with this,” he said, holding out his waistcoat. John turned him around to buckle it at the small of Sherlock’s back; it would just peek out from underneath his jacket in a touch of deep red against the black tuxedo.

Sherlock moved behind him and reached around John’s shoulders to tie his bow tie. “I’m capable of tying my own,” John said, still a little starry-eyed as he looked in the mirror at his brand-new fiance.

“Nonsense. I’ve seen your attempts. I practically grew up in a tuxedo. I learned to tie a bow tie when I learned to tie my shoelaces.” He expertly twisted the black silk into a perfect bow; John had to admit it was better than the one he’d have tied. Sherlock let his hands rest on John’s shoulders; for a moment they just looked at themselves in the mirror. “I think we look rather well together,” Sherlock said, quietly.

John smiled. “I think so, too.” He brought his hands up to cover Sherlock’s, his engagement presents gleaming at his cuffs. “I love my cuff links. Thank you.”

“Well, a ring didn’t seem appropriate, but I did want to offer you some sort of token. A bribe, if you’re of a cynical bent of mind.”

“As if I’d need bribing. We’ll have to go out and find our own rings now, I suppose. Will you wear one? You don’t care much for jewelry.”

“I’ll be honored to wear any ring you put on my finger, John.”

John turned away from the mirror and looked up at him. “You realize what this means?”
“That I can’t be forced to testify against you if you murder someone?”

“No,” John said, laughing. “I mean, yes, that’s true, or it will be, but that’s not what I mean.”

“Then tell me what you mean.”

“It’s…for real. We’re really doing this. You and me, for the rest of our lives.” Obviously, Sherlock knew this, but saying it out loud gave John a bit of a shiver. He’d never put it so bluntly, not even in his own mind.

Sherlock nodded. “That is the whole idea, is it not? That we pledge ourselves to each other and promise to share our lives? I believe we’ve already done that, John. But I recognize the need to legitimize the relationship with official documentation and the blessing of a governmental body, although it does rather baffle me.” Seeing John’s somewhat bewildered expression, Sherlock went on. “What I mean to say is that I already consider myself your partner for life. The rest is just—paperwork. So it’s been ‘for real’, as you say, for some time. At least, it has for me.”

“It has for me, too. But I’d still like to be able to tell the world that you’re my husband.”

“Would you like me to wear a badge of some sort, identifying me as such?” Sherlock teased him, his eyes sparkling.

John grinned. “No. Not a badge. Perhaps a tattoo….” John had to laugh at Sherlock’s horrified expression. No matter what happened at the ceremony tonight, he would have this, and they would have each other, and that was the best award he could have got for this film.

Sherlock could feel John’s impatience to get into the theater through the twitching of his fingers where they were interlaced with Sherlock’s. As was now standard procedure for them, they’d held hands all the way down the red carpet, waving and posing and enduring an interminable series of fluff interviews while never letting go of each other. Sherlock enjoyed holding John’s hand, but not when it was mandated by Irene. “If you drop his hand they’ll all leap on it like there’s trouble in paradise,” she’d said. “You have to present a united front to that pack of hyenas.” So no matter how sweaty, cramped-up or stiff their hands got, they didn’t dare let go.

Of course, every single interviewer wanted to know if their nominations had caused any competitive tension between them. They all asked the question in that patronizing look-how-liberated-I-am tone with that little glimmer in their eye, that you-can-tell-me twinkle as they teased and angled for a juicy tidbit. Sherlock was half-tempted to tell them that John had been sleeping on the couch since the nominations were announced and that they hadn’t spoken in weeks, just to see the looks on their faces. Naturally, he did no such thing. They both gave approved, generic answers and smiled their practiced red-carpet smiles and forged ahead. A couple of times he’d looked at John and caught a glimpse of the real him, not the actorly façade, but the man behind it, the man he knew and loved, and it was a relief. They’d exchanged a quick glance or a subtle eyeroll and then resume their progress through the gauntlet.

John let go of Sherlock’s hand and flexed his fingers as they finally reached the relatively safe haven of the theater’s lobby. “You were hanging on rather tightly,” he commented.

“I can’t have anyone stealing you away now, when you’ve just agreed to endow me with all your worldly goods.”

“I get half of yours, too. Oh, that means half-ownership of the Jaguar! Brilliant!” John’s smile lit up his face, and once again Sherlock was struck dumb with sheer amazement at this man, who could
stand in the lobby at the Academy Awards, probably more nervous than he’d ever been in his life, crack a joke, and grin like a kid in a ice cream shop just out of the joy of the moment. Sherlock had never possessed that gift, but being in close proximity to it had benefits.

For half an hour, they drifted about the lobby, making small talk and avoiding the press. Molly found them and introduced them to her impossibly handsome date, and the four of them formed a little protective huddle near the bar. Sherlock pretended not to notice that John kept glancing at the doors into the theater, which were standing tantalizingly open. Members of the public who had tickets and the nominees in the less photogenic categories were going right in and finding their seats, but it would look odd for two Best Actor nominees to be sitting in their seats half an hour early like overeager schoolchildren. Sherlock kept half an eye on George, who was surrounded by hangers-on across the lobby. Nobody was better at navigating Hollywood’s unwritten rules and oblique codes of social behavior than George, so everyone waited for him to make his move.

At length, he did, about ten minutes before the ceremony was due to start. As soon as he went into the theater, everyone followed, and suddenly they were in the aisle with what seemed like half the audience, maneuvering their way to the front. Sherlock reached back and grabbed John’s hand. “Oh, isn’t that sweet,” said a familiar voice. “Like little children in a scary fairy tale.”

Sherlock turned, his lip curling at the sight of Moriarty. “I see your Rent-a-Date canceled on you,” he said, addressing Moriarty’s lack of an escort to the ceremony. “I suppose even professionals have standards.”

“Sherlock,” John said, a warning in his tone.

“Oh, there’s no cause for concern, John,” Moriarty said, his conspiratorial tone grating on Sherlock’s nerves. As if he had anything in common with John, or was even worthy to breathe the same air. “He’s always been...prickly. I learned to let him roll off my back long ago.”

John stepped half in front of Sherlock, his jaw clenching. “I don’t need you to tell me what he’s like, Jim.”

“Dear me. He is adorable when he’s puffed up, isn’t he, Sherlock?”

“Excuse us,” Sherlock said, teeth gritted, pulling John away down the aisle through a gap in the crowd that opened up right then. He didn’t look back, just plowed ahead to the front row. A few of their colleagues greeted them on the way, wishing them luck. John motioned to Meryl Streep’s seat. “After you,” he said. She sat, glamorous in her tasteful gown, giving John a big smile.

“You too, Sherlock. You’re having a very busy year.” Her eyes were full of good humor.

“That is something of an understatement. I don’t believe you’ve met John.”

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure,” she said, turning her serene smile on John, whose ears had gone pink. She extended her hand and John shook it. “So nice to meet you,” she said.

“The pleasure is mine,” John said, giving Meryl that charming smile that had launched a dozen romantic comedies.

“I really loved your film. You were both magnificent in it,” she said.

“Thank you,” John said. “You were remarkable as well, but then you’re never anything else.” The ushers began urging everyone to take their seats. John motioned to Meryl’s seat. “After you,” he said. She sat, glamorous in her tasteful gown, giving John a big smile.
Sherlock and John took their seats. “Aren’t you the ladies’ man?” Sherlock murmured into John’s ear.

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous,” John said, leaning close with a flirty smirk.

“That’s ridiculous,” Sherlock said. “Why would I be jealous? You are engaged to me, after all.”

“It’s all right if you’re jealous—that’s worked out rather well for us in the past, hasn’t it?” John said, quirking one eyebrow.

Sherlock sighed. “I am not jealous, and now is hardly the time,” he said, tossing John an amused glance.

The lights dimmed. “Oh Lord, here we go,” John said, sounding a bit breathy.

Sherlock reached out and took his hand. “It’ll all be over in four hours. Focus on that. If you get distracted, which you will, just clap when everyone else claps. You’ll be fine.”

The camera crews were in place; one operator had set up camp right next to them. The stage was set. The audience was seated.

And then the show began.

John wasn’t the only distracted nominee in the audience. Sherlock only half-paid attention to Billy Crystal’s inane opening monologue, which naturally had to contain a joke about him and John at which they were obliged to laugh good-naturedly (“I know some of you are Method actors, but there is a line”), and when the show began in earnest, it quickly devolved into a blur of presenters and nominees and dull acceptance speeches. Their category would not be called for several hours, as the Best Actor statuette was scheduled as the penultimate award of the show, so they’d have plenty of time to stew.

As Irene had predicted, the director kept a camera on them continuously. Sherlock had never been so conscious of schooling his expression; fortunately, that was a skill he’d mastered long ago. Less fortunately, as the evening wore on it became clear that their film wasn’t the prettiest girl at the dance. Andrew Bird’s score didn’t win, and cinematography went to For Which It Stands.

“If Molly doesn’t win, that’s a bad sign,” John whispered during a commercial break, just before the Best Original Screenplay award was to be announced.

“Very bad. But she’s such an overwhelming favorite, I’m sure she will.”

She did. John and Sherlock stood up, as did Ang, who was seated just behind them. Molly came up the aisle from her seat and they all hugged her; she was shaking so hard she could barely walk. Sherlock glanced at John, who was beaming with pride. He couldn’t help but feel it himself. If it were not for Molly’s writing, none of them would be here, and Sherlock would never have met John. For that alone, he thought she deserved every award that existed.

The next fifteen minutes crept by at a snail’s pace. Sherlock felt John’s left leg start to bounce nervously and nudged him a little. “Find your neutral space,” Sherlock whispered. John’s leg stopped and he smiled a little.

Sherlock took a deep breath as Natalie Portman took the stage to present the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role. He didn’t think he was imagining that the level of tension in the room went up significantly. He glanced over at John, who was attempting to look calm and nonchalant and failing miserably. John met his eyes, the fuck me, here we go clear in his expression. Sherlock smiled
at him and squeezed his fingers. The camera operators were in place to shoot reaction shots of all five nominees, Natalie was rattling off the canned introductory spiel, and this was it.

She read the list of nominees. After each name, a short clip of their performance was projected on the monitors. Sherlock’s was from the final epic confrontation between Benjamin and Mark. John’s was from Mark’s discovery of his brother’s body.

“And the Oscar goes to...”

Never would Sherlock have believed that the opening of an envelope could seem so interminable.

Natalie looked at the card and grinned. “John Watson, in To a Stranger.

Sherlock’s mind blanked out for a moment, the explosion of applause and wild cheers lost in a white haze of relief, joy and pride. Before he’d realized that he’d moved, Sherlock found himself on his feet with his arms full of John, hugging him tight, John exhaling a sharp, disbeliefing breath and sucking in another. When he pulled back all he saw was John’s face, glowing with amazement and happiness, and Sherlock couldn’t stop himself. He pulled John close and planted a quick kiss on his lips. John squeezed Sherlock’s arm and walked off to the stairs. The entire exchange had taken five seconds.

The applause kept rising. Sherlock watched, amazed, as the audience stood. A standing ovation for the Best Actor winner was by no means assumed, but tonight, this room full of Hollywood royalty were on their feet for John Watson, a man he’d once deemed unworthy to screen test with him. How wrong he’d been, how wrong they’d all been.

John reached Natalie and she handed him his Oscar, then threw her arms around him in an enthusiastic hug. She released him and he went to the microphone, staring down at the statuette as if he were afraid it might detonate in his hands. The cheers and applause went on for a little longer, a few whistles and whoops thrown in with scattered laughter and shouting. Finally everyone calmed down and took their seats. “Oh, God,” John said, his tone so perfectly befuddled and amazed that it made everyone laugh again. “I don’t...God, I’ve got so many names and no time. If you got a paycheck from Focus for this film then I thank you. Molly, for putting such great words in my mouth, my sister Harry, the world’s best PA, and my incredible manager Irene who has been our hero these past few months...God, I can’t believe this, is this happening?” He gave a little headshake. “I’ve been very lucky, I’ve had a good career. But it isn’t every day that a bloke like me gets a chance to reinvent himself, and by believing in me, that’s what Ang Lee did for me by casting me in this film. I hoped I had this in me, and the fact that you’re all telling me that I pulled it off, it means so much.” He hesitated, looking down at the statuette. “You know...holding this thing, when I let myself imagine this...I thought it would be a great honor, and it is. I thought it would mean everything, and it does mean a lot. But it can’t compare to what this film’s already given me, what it’s meant to me. That it’s meant a lot to so many other people is...I can’t tell you how that makes us all feel. I thank everyone who made this happen. And of course, I have to thank....” He paused and looked away for a moment, biting his lip. Sherlock swallowed hard over the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. John faced forward again. “This is not my award alone, it’s also Sherlock’s, because I could not have done this without him. I am honored and grateful to share this with him. Almost as honored and grateful as I am to share my life with him.” He took a breath and lowered his eyes. The audience was dead silent; everyone could see that John was trying to keep it together. Sherlock felt his own chin trembling. When John looked up again, he looked right at him. “Sherlock, of all the things this film did for me, by far the greatest is that it brought me to you.” His voice went rough on the last few words. Sherlock’s heart lurches sideways in his chest and he let out a shaky breath, feeling his eyes welling up. John held up his Oscar. “Thank you all, I’m so honored.”
The music started up as he walked away. Natalie hugging him again and hanging on his arm as they left the stage together. Sherlock gripped the arms of his seat to stop himself from leaping up and following him. The broadcast went to commercial. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find Ang smiling at him. “Congratulations. He really deserved it,” he said.

“Yes, he did,” Sherlock said.

A seat-filler materialized in John’s chair. Sherlock stared straight ahead, contemplating how long it would be before he could see and touch John again. There was the Best Picture award, of course, and John would be stuck with the press for at least an hour. Plots surfaced in his mind as to how he could sneak into the press room afterwards, but he didn’t want to hijack John’s moment of glory, either.

He would never have imagined that he’d be looking forward to the interminable post-awards party circuit, but at least he’d be with John. That could make anything bearable.

John didn’t remember walking to the stage. He barely remembered talking. He had no idea what he’d said. All he remembered was looking down and seeing Sherlock in the front row. He didn’t remember walking off, either, but now he was in the wings with Natalie hugging him and there was something heavy in his hand.

“I’m so glad you won,” she was saying. She pulled back, bouncing on her toes a little. “I really hoped, but after Jim won the SAG I didn’t know how it would go.”

He stared down at his Oscar. “I can’t believe it. I really won,” he said, dazed. “What did I say? Did I say anything embarrassing? I can’t remember, it’s all a blur.”

“You gave a great speech. Very heartfelt. Sherlock teared up.”

“Sherlock?” John said, incredulous. “My Sherlock?”

“He looked so proud.” She put her hand on his arm. “John, they gave you a standing ovation.”

“They did?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I hope that helps calm some of your fears about your career.”

“I wish it did. It feels great to receive that kind of support, and I appreciate it, but you and I know that applause on Oscar night doesn’t always mean projects the next day.”

“You’re an Oscar winner now, though. Nothing can take that away.”

John smiled, looking down at his--his!--Oscar again. “I am, aren’t I?”

“I hope you’re ready for the press room.”

“I’ll wait for the Best Picture announcement, then go.”

Natalie kissed his cheek and left him with the ushers and the stagehands. He glanced out at the sliver of audience he could see; happily, that sliver included Sherlock, who was sitting very primly with his legs crossed and a seat-filler at his side.

The music swelled, and then Martin Scorsese took the stage to announce the Best Picture winner. He read off the nominees (seven this year) and a clip from each was shown. The clip from To a Stranger was from one of John’s favorite scenes: the first time Mark brings Benjamin to meet his family. It
was a scene full of humor stretched over simmering cauldron of tension and mistrust, and it had not been easy to play.

Drum roll.

“And the Oscar goes to...The Artist!”

John sighed. Still, if he could have chosen a film for them to lose to, it would have been that one. He and Sherlock had both loved it. The evening had brought them many awards, but more important than that (to him, anyway) was how well the film had been received by audiences.

“Mr. Watson, please come with me,” said one of the ushers.

The next hour rushed by in a blur of bright lights, camera flashes, and questions coming at him from all directions. The press corps was more frenzied than usual due to his “stunning upset” (which he was asked to comment on/analyze/react to/feel something about no fewer than five times) and his “dramatic career turnaround” (which he was asked to explain/justify/feel things about), not to mention the aftermath of his “personal revelation” (which he was asked to discuss in more ways than he thought was possible). Someone asked about Moriarty’s insinuations about publicity stunts, someone else about John’s career plans going forward, and someone, bizarrely, asked him if he’d seen Torch Song Trilogy.

John should have known better, but as the press conference drew to a close without any major PR disasters, he made the mistake of letting his guard down. A reporter from one of the larger blogs stood up and asked her question, barely containing her eagerness.

“John, do you and Sherlock have any plans to get married?”

It was a very near thing. John was so wired and giddy from his win that it almost popped right out. Yes, we do. In fact, we’re engaged. Sherlock asked me to marry him while we were getting ready for the ceremony, and I couldn’t say yes fast enough. He caught himself just in time. He couldn’t drop that bomb without talking to Sherlock and Irene. Sherlock would forgive him, but he dreaded getting on Irene’s bad side. He scrambled for a reasonable answer. “We’ve hardly had time to think about that,” he said. “Ask me again in a month when we’ve had a chance to catch our breath.”

At long last, his interrogation was over. Irene appeared in the doorway when his time was up; as soon as they were clear of the press’s view, she leapt on him in a ferocious hug. “John, you gorgeous thing. I will never make you do anything you don’t want to do, ever again.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts,” he laughed, patting her back.

“Let me see that,” she said, reaching for his Oscar. He handed it over and she hefted it. “Oh, John. I know you don’t think in these terms, but no one’s ever deserved this more.”

“Sherlock deserves it more than I do. His performance made mine possible.”

“I think you underestimate how much your performance made his possible. As I’m sure he’d remind you if he were here.”

“Where is he?” John said, looking around. All he wanted right now was to seize that man by his shawl-collar lapels and kiss the public-school accent right out of him.

“He’s waiting for us in the lobby. Come on, I know you’re dying to see him.” John followed Irene up the stairs and spotted Sherlock right away; he was across the room talking to Ron Howard. Sherlock saw him at almost the same moment. John saw him excuse himself; they met halfway and
Sherlock grabbed him up in a tight embrace. John exhaled, finally coming back down to Earth. “I won,” he said, reduced to simple declaratives.

“I know, John. I told you that you would.” Sherlock drew back and smiled down at him. “And you didn’t believe me.”

“No, I didn’t,” John said, laughing. “That’ll teach me, won’t it?” He looked up at Sherlock, a little punch-drunk with the intensity of his feelings for this man. “I meant what I said up there. Every word. Well, I assume that I do; I barely remember any of it.”

“I know you meant it. You always mean what you say, and you deserve this, not just for this performance but for being the sort of man you are. You deserve every good thing that can possibly happen to you.” Sherlock broke off, looking a bit perplexed at hearing this pronouncement emerge from his own mouth. John suspected Sherlock had imbibed a little while he waited.

John smiled. “Every good thing that can possibly happen?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing could be better than what’s already happened.”

Sherlock nodded. “You won tonight.”

John shook his head. “I met you.”

Sherlock stared at him with a lost, wondering look in his eyes, like a child who’s just been told that yes, Father Christmas was real after all. John grinned and pulled him down into a kiss. People were staring, but he didn’t care. If he wanted to kiss the man he loved in the lobby of the Kodak Theater, he’d bloody well do it.

Because I’m an Academy Award Winner, I do what I want, and fuck you.

John’s career as an actor had given him plenty of experience with notoriety, and how everyone suddenly wanted to be his friend, but it had never been like this. Was it like this all the time for people like George? How did they handle it?

He’d never been in a position to “hold court,” as it was called, but that’s what he and Sherlock ended up doing at the Governor’s Ball. Their arrival was greeted with a robust round of applause and cheers. John, caught up in the moment, had shaken his Oscar in the air like a prizefighter, earning himself even more cheers, but then he’d had to relinquish it.

“But...I don’t want to let go of it,” he’d said, as they walked to the engraving booth. “What if they realize there was a terrible mistake and they don’t give it back?”

“They’re just going to engrave your name on it,” Sherlock said, his arm around John’s shoulders. “They’ll give it right back, I promise.” A few nearby guests overheard this exchange and grinned at them. “It’s yours, forever. You do want your name on it, don’t you?”

John had sighed, gazing longingly down at his statuette. “I suppose.” He’d handed it over with a little put-on sad-face, and they’d rejoined the party in time for dinner.

In the past, when he’d attended parties like this (this very party on two occasions), he’d always envied those celebrities famous or powerful enough to sit in one spot and let everyone else jockey for face time with them. He’d always been the one doing the jockeying, but this time he couldn’t have
left his table had he wanted to. The moment he even considered it, someone else would appear to hug and congratulate him, or a photographer would show up and want a photo, or a waiter would put yet more food in front of him.

Irene did not let them stay long, however. They had apparently been promised to Elton John’s party, and then the Vanity Fair party, so before John could sneak a second helping of the heart-stoppingly delicious dessert, Harry and Sally were hustling them out the door with barely a chance to bid goodbye to anyone.

Their last stop of the evening, the Vanity Fair party, was less eating and posturing, more drinking and dancing and gossiping. Once again, John and Sherlock’s table was the one everyone wanted to visit and, ideally, get photographed at. It was a sign of their level of pull that when George and his date showed up, he asked to join them. “Hell of a night, isn’t it?” he said, taking a vacant seat.

“I’m still not entirely convinced it wasn’t a hallucination,” John said.

George picked up John’s Oscar and examined the newly-engraved plate. “Well, it does have your name on it.” Everyone laughed. John settled back against Sherlock’s side, their hands clasped together between them. He’d never felt quite this relaxed being with Sherlock in public before. He supposed having received not just an Oscar, but a standing ovation as well, had helped smooth over what was left of his self-consciousness.

A familiar face emerged from the crowd. “John!” Sarah called, working her way over to their table. John grinned and jumped up to hug her. Anthea was trailing after her, and both of them looked stunning. “Hello, luv,” he said. “I’m sorry it wasn’t your night tonight.”

She sighed. “I know I’m supposed to be gracious and say that it’s an honor to be nominated, but fuck it, I’m disappointed and I don’t mind admitting it. But seeing you win made up for it. God, John, your speech. It was...well, I was sniffling, and so were a lot of people around me.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, I don’t remember much.” He leaned past her to kiss Anthea’s cheek. “Wonderful to see you here. Both of you,” he added, with emphasis.

Sarah nodded. She was glowing. “We didn’t go to the ceremony together. I didn’t want to answer the questions just yet. We’ve made no statement, we’re not going to issue a press release, she’ll just be my date from now on and everyone can make of that what they will. You might say that we were inspired,” she said, glancing past him at Sherlock, who was talking to Javier Bardem.

“Sometimes I wish we’d had the luxury of managing our coming-out with less urgency, but in the end I’m rather glad we used the slash-and-burn approach. Got everything bloody well over with.”

“Are you going to Elton’s?”

“We just came from there, actually. We’re not staying long here, either. I’ve got contingency bookings on two morning shows tomorrow. Funny, when I agreed to them, I never really thought I’d win and would have to follow through. I’ll have to be up at some ungodly hour for the GMA live feed, and then I have to go on Leno tomorrow night. I wish I could just lie about the house all day, but I suppose it’s worth it for my new paperweight.”

Sarah laughed. “Your phone’ll be ringing off the hook.”

John sobered a little. “That’d be a welcome change.”

“Has it been bad?” she asked, lowering her voice.
“Well, it hasn’t been good. I’ve had some things fall through, a few casting directors who are suddenly not returning my calls. Sherlock’s got the Tesla project, but so far I am...without projects in the pipeline.”

“It just takes one, John. One project to prove that you’re still marketable even if you live with a man.”

“The trick will be getting that one project.” He forced a smile. “But let’s not talk business. How’s that gorgeous baby?”

Sherlock checked his watch as he waited at the bar. It was just after midnight, and he knew he ought to get John home soon. He had early interview feeds, and Sherlock had his own plans for John that absolutely had to be realized before either of them slept.

So far, the evening hadn’t been entirely insufferable. John was definitely the main attraction. Everyone wanted to congratulate him, kiss his cheek, shake his hand, and tell him how marvelous he’d been...but no one was asking him to call them about a project, or if he was interested in the script they were developing. Such talk was very much _de rigeur_ at these parties, which were as much a chance to do a lot of networking in a short time as they were a chance to drink and celebrate. John didn’t seem to notice, but then he hadn’t been to as many of these parties as Sherlock had. He’d be damned if he’d bring it up and spoil John’s enjoyment of this celebration of his success, which was richly deserved.

“My, what a beatific expression. Thinking of your sweetie, are you?”

Sherlock sighed. “What if I am?” He turned to face Moriarty, who still looked perfectly put-together and groomed at a time of night when most of the men had, at the very least, loosened their ties, but Sherlock could see through his façade. His eyes, and the slight tilt to his voice, betrayed how much he’d had to drink, and there was tension around his brow. “One should look happy when thinking of one’s ‘sweetie,’ correct? Of course, you wouldn’t know, never having had one.”

Jim leaned back against the bar. “The media is calling this a shocking upset,” he said, smooth as silk. “I’ve been much too busy celebrating John’s win to pay attention to what’s being said in the press.”

“I’ve been much too busy celebrating John’s win to pay attention to what’s being said in the press.”

“No doubt the voters felt sorry for him, since he’d been repeatedly defeated by another nominee. Sentiment was on his side.”

“And why might sentiment be on his side, Jim? Could it be because so many people felt that he was _unjustly_ beaten out for other awards by that other nominee, who had been badmouthing his competition on national television? If that were the case, it’d be hard to characterize that sentiment as unjustified.”

Jim seemed unfazed by this. He shook his head, as if saddened by a great tragedy. “It pains me to see you like this, Sherlock. Once, you were a force to be reckoned with. You were in control. You were your own man. You were encumbered by no extraneous considerations. You were a being built for one purpose: the work. The craft was your only master. A man cannot serve two masters, Sherlock. I fear you will lose your way amid all this...emotion.” He shuddered and leaned close, his affable demeanor vanishing and real malice appearing behind his eyes. “Your John’s career won’t last, and we both know it. I know too many people in this town, Sherlock, and I know too much _about_ the people in this town. He won’t work again. He’ll be forced out and you’ll have to support him, until you’re forced out, too. How long do you think your revolutionary little love affair will last then, eh?”
Sherlock raised his glass. “Till death do us part,” he said. “And John is the sort of man that you may take at his word.” He walked away, satisfied with that particular *coup de grâce*, but as he put more distance between him and Jim, he grew alarmed. *Bollocks, what did I just do?*

John met him halfway to their table. “There you are! That must be the slowest bartender in history!”

“I ran into our old friend Jim.”

John rolled his eyes. “I can afford to ignore him now, I think.’

“I may have told him that we’re engaged.”

John’s smile froze on his face. “Ah,” he said, exhaling slowly. “You just...*told* him?”

“Not straight out. It was more like an implication.”

“I can’t say he’d be my choice for the first person to hear our news.”

“I know. I’m sorry, darling.”

John shrugged it off. “Well, it isn’t as if we’d planned to keep it a secret. We’ll just need to tell Irene sooner rather than later.”

“I seem to keep making unplanned outbursts that detonate our options.”

“You do have other qualities to recommend you.”

He looked John up and down. “I may have forgotten to mention that I’ve never seen you look more handsome.”

John blushed a little. “Thanks. It’s a bit rough on the ego, walking around next to someone as gorgeous as you.”

“Even if I stipulate as to my attractiveness, which I do not, such things inevitably fade with time. You are fortunate to possess virtues that are immutable...as I am fortunate to benefit from them daily.”

John slipped his hand into Sherlock’s. “We’ll have the rest of our lives to benefit from each other,” he said.

“Yes, we will.” Sherlock smiled and drew him into an embrace. He felt John’s arm go around him and shut his eyes, Moriarty and the Oscars and lingering career worries falling away and leaving just him and John, and this unexpected life they were making together.

The ride home was quiet. After the cacophony of the past twelve hours, the inside of their limo was a haven of peace. They didn’t speak, just sat close together, Sherlock’s arm around John’s shoulders. John rested his hand on Sherlock’s thigh and stroked the soft wool with his thumb. He sighed as the limo pulled up to the house. “Home at last,” he said. “Where shall I put it?” He held up his newly-engraved Oscar.
“Anywhere you like.”

“We’ll have to have yours sent from London so we can use them as bookends.”

Sherlock laughed. “I’ve always been tempted to use it as a doorstop.”

“Would it be tacky to wear it on a chain around my neck?” John said as they went into the house.

“Well, it would be quite rough on your neck.” Sherlock bent and pressed his lips to John’s nape.

“And I am very fond of your neck,” he purred, dropping his voice into a lower register--his most reliable trick when he wanted to turn John’s mind immediately to sex.

John groaned, set his Oscar on the hall table, spun around, and seized Sherlock’s face, kissing him deeply. He pressed closer, sucked on Sherlock’s lower lip, and then pulled back just a hair. “God, I’ve been thinking about doing that all night,” he whispered, their lips barely touching as he spoke. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted you so badly.”

“Well, you are the man of the hour,” Sherlock said, low and intimate. “You can have your way with me.”

“Can I?” John said, grinning like it was Christmas and he’d just gotten the biggest, shiniest present under the tree. “Are you all mine to do with as I please?”

“You did say that I was your best reward for doing this film.”

John’s expression turned a bit serious. “You are.”

Sherlock took John in his arms and kissed him again, taking his time about it. He kissed John in a way he knew he enjoyed, greedy hands and quick brushes of their lips traded off with long, deep kisses that pulled them further into each other. He slid his hand down to John’s arse and gave it a slow, deliberate squeeze, then brushed his lips across John’s cheek to his ear. “Take me to bed, John. You’ve made me wait long enough.”

He felt John smile as he took his hand and pull him toward the stairs. He followed along, a flutter of anticipation unfurling in his belly at the thought of all the ways he and John might drive each crazy tonight. John stopped at the top of the stairs and turned around, taking advantage of his brief height superiority over Sherlock, to bend him backwards slightly and kiss him. He pulled away just enough so their lips were barely touching. “I can’t wait to marry you,” he whispered, then hauled him down the hall to their bedroom.

John turned around and gave him a slanted smile, that damn smile that he knew would get him whatever he wanted. He ran his hands up Sherlock’s chest. “You know how hard it was to keep my hands to myself all night, watching you walk around in this tuxedo? It was torture. The only thing that kept me from molesting you in front of God and everybody was knowing that I’d get to unwrap you at the end of the night.” He slipped his hands under Sherlock’s jacket and pushed it off his shoulders. He grabbed the necktie and pulled him down for another slow, deep kiss, then slid his hands down to unbuckle Sherlock’s waistcoat.

Sherlock pulled on John’s bow tie and whipped it off his neck, then attacked his buttons. Shirt studs flew across the room. John let go of Sherlock for long enough to shrug out of his own jacket and they both half-stumbled as they toed off their shoes, grabbing each other for balance and giggling. John seized Sherlock’s hips and pulled them tight against his; Sherlock could feel him hard beneath his trousers. “God, what you do to me,” John said, sliding a hand around to Sherlock’s arse and kissing him again.
“What you do to me,” Sherlock said, reaching for John’s trousers. John unbuttoned Sherlock’s shirt and bent to kiss his bare chest, flicking his tongue over one of Sherlock’s nipples. Sherlock sighed and arched his back, dropping his arms so John could pull his shirt away. John stepped out of his trousers and started pulling Sherlock toward the bed. The rest of their clothing was shrugged, yanked and ripped off en route.

Sherlock pushed John down to the bed and climbed over him, sighing as they embraced each other skin to skin. Sherlock propped up on one elbow to kiss John languidly, the urgency of undressing each other falling away. He drew back and looked down at him. John lifted one hand and brushed his fingers through the curls at Sherlock’s temple. “Sometimes I can’t stop thinking about how close I came to never meeting you,” John said. “So many things had to go a certain way to get us both to that screen test. It doesn’t seem right that the thread is so fragile that if I went back and changed one tiny thing we wouldn’t be here, and I would never have known what I’d missed in you.”

“I’ve had those same thoughts, illogical as they are.”

“Ilogical?”

“Yes. It’s true that our meeting was the culmination of a long series of events, and changing any one of them could have derailed it. But the same is true for every other moment of your life, and every other thing that’s ever happened to you. We can’t know what we’ve missed out on due to happenstance. We can only know what we have now. And I have all I need.”

John tried to smile, but his lips were quivering too much. “God, I love you so much. I...I wish I could say it better. More poetically.”

“It’s poetic no matter how you say it.” John grinned, and Sherlock bent to kiss him again. John sighed into his mouth and kissed back, rolling them over. He slid his hips between Sherlock’s and worked a hand between them, seizing Sherlock’s cock and giving it a few long strokes. Sherlock cupped John’s arse and wound their legs together, straining up to kiss John harder. “How do you want me tonight?” he whispered. “Whatever you want, just tell me.”

“I want you inside me,” John said, breathless, still kissing Sherlock as he spoke. “I want to ride you until you come. I want to watch your face and know that I made you look like that. That I made you feel like that,” he said, punctuating it with a long, firm stroke to Sherlock’s cock.

“Bloody hell, John,” Sherlock gasped, helpless arousal slamming through him. John grinned and slid down Sherlock’s body to take him in his mouth. Sherlock groaned and tangled his fingers in John’s hair, still tacky with the product the stylist had put in it. “I thought...perhaps...you’d want...oh, God, yes like that...to fuck me.”

John hummed around his cock, then pulled off and looked up at him, lips wet and cheeks flushed. “You’ll get your chance,” he said, with a mischievous smirk. “I love having you inside me. I love what it does to you. And I love--and I do mean love--your cock.” He bent and slipped it into his mouth again.

“Ohhhhh John, not too much, or you’ll end up waiting,” Sherlock gasped, his hips making little involuntary thrusts into John’s mouth.

John pulled off and crawled up Sherlock’s body, kissing his navel and his chest. “I’m not waiting,” he growled, sucking and nipping at Sherlock’s neck. “I just wanted you nice and hard, ready to give me a good ride.”

Sherlock pulled the lube out of the nightstand and smeared some on his fingers, then reached around
John’s hips and slid his fingers inside. John hissed and tilted his arse toward Sherlock’s hand. “Oh, you’ll get your ride, John,” he whispered in his ear. “You might get more than you bargained for.” He slicked his cock and held it in position while John slid back onto him. Sherlock’s head slammed back into the pillows as he felt himself surrounded by John’s tight heat, overwhelmed by John’s smell, John’s body, his hands on Sherlock’s chest and the little noises he made as he began to move.

“Sherlock,” John breathed, his head thrown back. “Yes, God, right there....” He seated himself in the cradle of Sherlock’s hips and rocked, and Sherlock’s eyes rolled back in his head. John gave a low, sexy chuckle and rocked again. “You like that, baby?”

“Fuck,” Sherlock said. It seemed to be the sum total of his vocabulary at the moment. He grasped John’s hips as they pressed forward and back. John leaned forward and kissed him, planting his knees and thrusting down on him as Sherlock wound his arms around John’s torso and kissed back, a little frantically. He braced his feet and pushed up.

A helpless sort of grunt came from John’s throat and his jaw clenched. “God, yeah, like that,” he muttered. Sherlock did it again, harder, and John pushed back until they settled into a rhythm. John reached up and grabbed the headboard for leverage so he could thrust down harder, staring into Sherlock’s face with sweat dripping down his forehead, flushed and panting and the sexiest thing Sherlock had ever seen. He grasped John’s erection and stroked it, feeling his own orgasm approaching and wanting John to come, too.

Sherlock’s body tensed, his breath coming in fast gasps. “John...I’m....”

“Yes, do it,” John hissed. “Come inside me. Are you close?”

“Mmm...close, yes....” Sherlock stroked him faster, that light touch with a thumb over the crown, just how John liked it. “Come with me.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna...oh, Sherlock...now, come on, do it now!”

Sherlock’s back arched and he came, his hand still moving on John’s cock; John followed a few seconds later, crying out and pulsing over Sherlock’s stomach. They both went still for a few moments, breathing hard and riding out the aftershocks, and then John slowly relaxed, smiling down at him. He sighed happily and slid his hands up and down Sherlock’s damp chest a few times. Sherlock ran his hands up John’s arms and back down again, content to watch his blissed-out face. “I hope that fulfilled the requirements of ‘a good ride,’” he said.

John grinned and lowered himself into Sherlock’s arms, sliding off him to the side and cuddling close. “A very good ride,” he said. “Maybe we could wait half an hour and swap out?”

Sherlock glanced at the clock. “Tempting as that sounds, my love, you have a live feed in three and a half hours. We should probably get some sleep.”

“I’m all sticky, and so are you.”

He sat up and pulled John out of bed. “Come on, then. Let’s see how fast we can shower.”

As it turned out, they could shower very fast. Within five minutes they were back in bed, under the covers this time, damp-haired and fresh and wrapped around each other. “I still can’t believe I won,” John whispered.

“It won’t seem real until it’s real in daylight. I remember that feeling.” John burrowed in, tucking his head under Sherlock’s jaw, pressing a kiss to his collarbone. “I think this might be the closest I’ll ever come to a perfect day,” he said. “If perfection were possible, even in this hyperbolic usage.”
He felt John smile. “Perfect, huh?”

“Well, consider: I asked you to marry me, and you said yes. I watched you win an Academy Award, defeating a man I despise. I listened to you thank me in your speech and say...well, things that took courage and feeling and that touched me deeply. After that, we went to fabulous parties where most of Hollywood bowed and scraped to us. And last, but certainly not least, I finally, finally got to do something that you’ve been doing for months now.”

John lifted his head, frowning in puzzlement. “What’s that?”

Sherlock grinned. “Fuck an Oscar winner.”

John gaped at him for a moment, then burst into mad giggles, his head dropping to Sherlock’s chest—and if there was one thing Sherlock had learned, it was that he was helpless not to join in when John Watson got giggling. They were laughing so hard that they almost didn’t hear the incoming-text alert. Sherlock picked up his phone and flicked open the message. “What is it?” John said. “God, let it be something we can handle from this bed.”

“It’s a link from Irene—it says ‘THE picture of the evening.’” He touched the link; when the photo loaded, Sherlock’s breath caught.

“What?” John said, craning his neck around. Sherlock held out the phone to show him. It was a photograph of them, taken at the Vanity Fair party. They were embracing, eyes closed, both of them looking utterly content. John’s arm was wrapped around Sherlock’s back, his Oscar in his hand. John sighed. “Look at us,” he said.

“I might like a copy of that,” Sherlock said.

“Me, too.” John touched the phone screen and zoomed in a little. “We look really happy.”

Sherlock turned the phone off and set it aside, then met John’s eyes across the pillow. “The camera doesn’t lie.”
1. The number of Oscar nominees for Best Picture is no longer set at ten. The Academy changed the rules so that only films that receive a certain percentage of the vote will be nominated, with the final number being anywhere from five to ten.
The amazing painting by Marielikesodraw was a surprise for me and I am blown away, amazed, honored, humbled, everything. All the awards for Marie.
Lesley Stahl: They are two of the most well-known actors of their generation. One is a classically trained Oscar winner known for artistic dramas and independent cinema, the other a well-liked star of romantic comedies. But before last year, both of their red-hot careers had gone cold. Big-budget films failed to perform at the box office; can’t-miss projects missed. They were both in need of something new, something different, and they found it in Ang Lee’s To a Stranger. Although the film would go on to win five Oscars, it was the unexpected love affair between its lead actors, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, that would dominate the headlines.

Tonight, 60 Minutes guest correspondent Diane Sawyer sits down with John and Sherlock for their first-ever interview as a couple.

Diane: Congratulations on your marriage!

Sherlock: Thank you.

John: We had the ceremony just there [points to the garden]. It was lovely. Very private.

Sherlock: Which was the cause of much Sturm und Drang with our publicist.

Diane: She wanted press coverage?

John: She wanted something. Anything. But we stood our ground. Just a few friends and family.

Diane: Why here?

John: This is a special place for us. We’ve spent a lot of time here.

Diane: [voiceover; footage of Diane, John and Sherlock walking on the grounds] John Watson came from a poor family; Sherlock Holmes grew up wealthy. Watson learned acting in night school classes and by his own study; Holmes received the best education money could buy. And yet these two men, so different in background and in their approach to their craft, would join forces to create what’s been called a modern masterpiece of cinema. They made the film hoping for career rejuvenation. Neither expected that the experience would also change their lives.

[Interior of the house. Diane is sitting in a wing chair facing Sherlock and John sitting on a sofa. They are sitting close together but not touching; they are relaxed and comfortable, here in their own home.]

Diane: John, you grew up in poverty.

John: Yes.
Diane: How did that experience shape you?

John: It made me value security. That’s been the driving force behind my whole career: the search for steady work and a reliable income.

Diane: What was your first job?

John: My first real job was the Army. I could have gone to University, I had the marks for it, but the Army offered me the security that I needed.

Diane: How long did you serve?

John: Four years. I hoped to go career, but that was all derailed when I was shot in the leg during the Drumcree riots. I had to figure out something else to do with my life, so I went to night school, thinking I’d take courses to be an electrician or something. Instead, I discovered theater.

Diane: Tell us about your first experience.

John: I’d gotten a bit friendly with a girl in one of my classes.

Sherlock: Friendly? How friendly?

John: Shush. I’m telling a story. She was in the drama club, and said they always needed more men to audition, and asked if I’d ever been in a play. I hadn’t, but it sounded like fun. So I went out for a lark. After my audition, the director took me aside and said, “You’re sure you’ve never done this before?” He said I was a natural, and he gave me a large role. [pause] I’d never been a natural at anything. Never been told I had any talent for anything. It was a rush. From the first day of rehearsal, that first script, the first time I was given blocking on a stage, I was hooked.

Diane: And what was your first paid acting job?

John: Oh, Lord. Let me think. I believe it was an advert for a local appliance salesman. They paid me twenty pounds to act thrilled about the selection of washing machines.

Sherlock: Don’t bother looking for it online. I’ve searched high and low and I can’t find it.

John: I don’t know why you want it so badly.

Sherlock: It’s the only missing piece in my personal collection of everything you’ve ever filmed. It’s taunting me, John. Taunting.

Diane: It’s a long way from local commercials to the Academy Awards. How did you get here from there?

John: All credit to my agent, Mike Stamford. I did a lot of theater, then started getting small jobs with the BBC. I played a lot of best friends and ex-boyfriends and co-workers those first couple of years. I thought I was in for a nice steady career as a working character actor, one of those vaguely familiar faces, and that was just fine with me. But then Mike saw me in a play and decided that I was the next big thing--that’s what he said, anyway. It was Mike who got me the audition for Rewind.

Diane: The film that changed your career.

John: Yes.
Diane: *Rewind* was a surprise commercial and critical success, and it made you a star overnight. What was that like?

John: I never thought *Rewind* would be that popular. Call it the *Four Weddings and a Funeral* effect, where a quirky little British rom-com gets plucked up and embraced by a global audience, and there I was, the next Hugh Grant. And suddenly I had *money*. All I could think about then was, all right, what’s the next one?

Diane: How did having financial security change you?

John: But I never really thought that I *had* security. It could all disappear at any time. So I had to take the next film that was offered to me, and the next, and the next. I never wanted to stop, not for a moment. If I stopped, they might all forget about me. They might come to their senses and realize that they’d been giving all these great jobs to ordinary, average me.

Sherlock: That’s ridiculous.

John: What?

Sherlock: You are neither ordinary nor average.

John: Not that you’re biased.

Sherlock: The Academy agrees with me, as do your legions of admirers. And I must object to the idea that my personal affection for you would render me incapable of an impartial assessment.

John: [to Diane] Yes, he really talks like that all the time.

Sherlock: Deflecting, John.

John: Well, you’re interrupting.

Diane: [laughing] Should I come back later?

John: I’m sorry. Let’s get back to your question.

Diane: I don’t know, I’m enjoying watching you two bicker.

John: Good, because it probably won’t be the last time!

Diane: Within four years after *Rewind*, you were one of Hollywood’s most bankable stars.

John: It’s still strange to hear myself described that way, because that was never how I thought of myself. Every time a film of mine performed well, it was a surprise.

Diane: What happened? After all your success, by the time *To a Stranger* came along, your career had cooled off quite a bit.

John: I wish I had a good, sensible answer to that question. I think I was afraid of backlash. Success is a blessing, but also a curse. If you succeed and then fail, it’s so much worse than if you’d never succeeded. So I had to keep working. I’d got to a place where I was able to support my parents, and help my siblings, and the need to maintain that was very strong. It wasn’t the best perspective from which to make career decisions. Ironically, I walked right into what I’d hoped to avoid. [he hesitates] If *To a Stranger* hadn’t been handed to me on a silver platter, I don’t know where I’d be now.
Diane: Sherlock, you had a different start in life.

Sherlock: Yes, very different.

Diane: Your family was quite well off.

Sherlock: I never thought of us as being well off, mostly because we were constantly surrounded by people who were even more so. My father was a diplomat, and so my parents knew a lot of people who were of a much higher station, shall we say. I was always the least posh kid in school.

[John laughs]

Sherlock: What?

John: It’s hard to imagine you being the least posh of anything.

Sherlock: It’s surprisingly easy at Eton, with all the offspring of the landed gentry.

John: Well, I wouldn’t know.

Sherlock: My family was well off, yes, but wealthier in connections than in currency.

Diane: When did you decide to dedicate yourself to acting?

Sherlock: I never studied anything except wholeheartedly, with the intention of mastering it. My other interests were too esoteric to be viable as fields of study...I’d have had to invent my own profession in order to pursue any of them. But acting presented a constant stream of challenges and new stimulation. I felt as if the craft had been conceived with me in mind.

Diane: Your family has been the subject of considerable speculation, as they’re something of a mystery.

Sherlock: I don’t discuss my family out of respect for their privacy.

Diane: All that is known is that you have one older brother.

Sherlock: Correct. He’s in...public service. But you have omitted one crucial family member.

Diane: Who’s that?

Sherlock: I also have a husband.

[John blushes and elbows him, Sherlock elbows back and they both grin]

Diane: My apologies.

John: We’re still getting used to that term. I’m afraid we’re rather overusing it.

Sherlock: Pass the salt, husband.

John: Did you set the alarm, husband?

Sherlock: That jumper is hideous, husband.
John: Hang on, which jumper is hideous?

Sherlock: The one with all the business here. [he gestures to his chest]

John: The Fair Isle jumper that my sister sent me? It’s a time-honored traditional knitting technique from the land of my ancestors. It is not hideous. Husband.

Sherlock: Perhaps we should discuss this at a later time when we’re not being filmed for national television.

John: Don’t worry, they can edit it out.

Diane: Over my dead body. [they all laugh] Sherlock, the turning point of your career was Out of Noise. Can you talk about what making that film was like?

Sherlock: It was a wake-up call. I assumed that after RADA, I could handle whatever Hollywood could throw at me. I thought I would walk in with my posh education and a few good notices and own the place. [he shrugs] I was young.

Diane: You found it more difficult than you’d imagined?

Sherlock: I found it different. I had to adapt my methods on the fly, adjust to a new country and new working conditions, and I had to do it all while playing the violin.

Diane: You must have adapted well; your performance earned you an Academy Award nomination.

Sherlock: Yes.

Diane: Were you surprised?

Sherlock: No, I wasn’t. I’d read the reviews, and every critic and pundit in town had predicted that I’d be nominated. I was glad, but not surprised. Nor was I surprised when I didn’t win; I never expected to. I recognized the nomination for what it was, a sort of “welcome to the club.” I appreciated that it gave me more options.

Diane: Options you took full advantage of during the years following your nomination, which led up to your Academy Award-winning performance in Kanizsa. How did you come to that film?

Sherlock: The director was interested in me for the role, so he sent my agent the script. I was not the only candidate, but I thought I was an excellent fit for the material. In the end, he thought so too. It was a challenging shoot.

Diane: There are those who thought that the film was a blatant bid for an Oscar on your part. It’s very nearly a one-man story, and it was a demanding role.

Sherlock: I’ve heard that said, yes. If others feel that I took the role with an eye on the Oscars, that’s their prerogative. I can honestly say that I’ve never thought about awards when choosing a project. My focus is on the challenges the script provides me as a performer, and how well I think I can communicate the character. I only care about the work.

Diane: If that’s the case, how can you account for the downturn that your career has taken over the past few years?

Sherlock: I’m not sure I can. That is the nature of this business. No one takes a project thinking that
it will fail. Some of the films I made after Kanizsa...did not reach an audience. Some of them ended up being quite different films than the one I signed up for. That is also the nature of this business and cannot be helped.

Diane: Do you take any responsibility for this series of under-performing films?

Sherlock: At the time, I did not. Looking back, I may have been overly stubborn in choosing my projects.

Diane: In what way?

Sherlock: I can be somewhat...contrary. [John chuckles] It’s possible that I chose projects that were less accessible just to prove that I was above pandering to a mainstream audience.

John: In other words, that you were above doing what I was doing.

Sherlock: Any actor who wants to make films that are both well-reviewed and profitable has to find a balance between audience appeal and artistic challenge. John and I were both failing to find that balance. He reacted by fleeing towards audience appeal, I by seeking refuge in artistic challenge. Neither approach was successful.

Diane: But all that changed with To a Stranger.

John: A lot of things changed with To a Stranger.

Diane: How did you both come to the project?

Sherlock: My agent gave me the script. Molly Hooper had written the film with me in mind.

John: I have never gotten a straight answer from Ang about what he saw in me, or how he could tell by the films I’d been doing that this part would be a good fit, but my agent told me that he wanted me to read. I couldn’t believe it. He asked me if it was a problem for me to play a gay man, and I said that I’d play any role Ang Lee asked me to.

Sherlock: After I read the script, I knew that I had to be in the film.

John: He was less enthusiastic once he found out that Ang had me in mind as his co-star.

Diane: Oh, really?

Sherlock: I’m afraid so. I was concerned, because I knew what this part would demand of my co-star, and I knew how closely we’d be working together.

Diane: You have a reputation for being difficult to work with.

Sherlock: [deadpan] I can’t imagine why. I think I’m delightful. [John laughs] I’m aware of my reputation. I can’t say that it’s undeserved. I don’t have a tolerant nature, and I’m very focused when I’m working. This makes me...not much fun. I prejudged John, unfairly as it turned out, and I thought that he would try my patience, not only personally, but as an acting partner. I wanted...actually, I needed this film to succeed, and I had no confidence in his ability to carry out his half of the heavy lifting, dramatically.

Diane: John, is it hard to hear him talk about what he thought of you?
John: Not really. It isn’t news to me. And I was accustomed to being looked down on for having starred in date movies and comedies. I was confident in my own capabilities as an actor, but I really didn’t expect anyone else to be. [he grins] Besides, he knows better now.

Diane: A lot changed between you during the making of the film.

Sherlock: That is an understatement.

Diane: Neither of you had ever been in a relationship with another man. Had either of you thought that you might be gay?

John: That’s not a simple question. I had never had romantic feelings for another man, but, to be fair, I’d barely had them for women, either. I had dated women in the past, women I was fond of and whose company I enjoyed. But I had never been in love until I met Sherlock.

Sherlock: I had never felt a strong connection to anyone, of either gender, before John. He seems to be the exception to all the rules I’ve ever set down, and every assumption I’ve made about myself. I never thought I’d want to share my life with someone, let alone find someone who wanted to share theirs with me.

John: To most of the world, the fact that I am married to Sherlock means that I am gay, full stop. I accept the label, but I’m not convinced it’s entirely accurate.

Sherlock: Labels are irrelevant to me. John is the first person I ever loved, and the only one I ever will. So the entire question is moot.

John: We’re not exactly anyone’s first choice for gay-rights poster boys.

Diane: The gay community has certainly embraced you.

John: Yes, they have. [he grins] We received sixty-two invitations to be Pride Parade Grand Marshals next month. We’re grateful to be accepted as a part of that community, and to have their support. If our existence as a high-profile same-sex couple helps further the cause of gay rights, we’re glad for it, but sometimes I wonder if I have the right to be held up as an example. I never struggled with my sexuality, or wondered if I fancied men. One day I looked at Sherlock and realized that I was in love with him. Does that change who I am? No. That potential must have been within me all along. I’ll leave the debate to the philosophers. I’m content to be married to him, and grateful to be a citizen of a country that allows me to be.

Diane: [voiceover; footage of Diane, John and Sherlock outdoors again] When we return, John and Sherlock talk about being in and out of the closet, winning Oscars, and life as a couple in Hollywood.

[COMMERCIAL]

[Diane, Sherlock, John walking the grounds of Holmes and Watson’s home in Sussex, England]

Diane: [voiceover] John and Sherlock kept their relationship secret so that the release of To a Stranger would not be overshadowed by what they knew would be a barrage of publicity. Unfortunately, this secrecy didn’t hold; two weeks before the film’s premiere, Sherlock outed them during a now-famous outburst at a press screening. This sudden reveal thrust them into the center of a media firestorm just as they began promoting the film that had brought them together.

[interior of the house; Diane in the wing chair, John and Sherlock on the sofa]
Diane: John, were you angry when Sherlock outed you?

John: I was, yes, but only until I realized why he’d done it. Then I was only angry with myself. I was upset that I hadn’t known how much it was hurting him to keep the secret.

Diane: Was the public reaction more or less severe than you thought it would be?


Sherlock: Agreed.

John: I think we both were envisioning worst-case scenarios in which we were burned in effigy and denounced from every pulpit, boycotted, tarred and feathered. There were those who spoke out against us, but the public backlash ended up being the least of our concerns.

Diane: Do you still experience backlash?

Sherlock: Oh, definitely. Hate mail, protest signs at events we attend, sometimes shouted insults and condemnations. But this is no less than we expected. And it is outweighed by the expressions of support we regularly receive.

Diane: *To a Stranger* exceeded expectations both critically and financially. Were you surprised at its success?

John: I wasn’t exactly surprised, but I was definitely relieved. I knew that it was a very good film, but I feared that people would be put off by all the media hype.

Diane: Which brings us to the Oscars.

John: Yes.

Diane: Your surprise win was the biggest story of the evening. Was it as surprising to you?

Sherlock: I wasn’t surprised at all. It was the only rational outcome.

Diane: Even more so than if you’d won yourself?

Sherlock: Of the two of us, I consider John the better actor.

John: Oh, God, here we go. That’s a load of rubbish. Sherlock has gifts I can only envy.

Sherlock: Things that I must struggle to achieve, John can do effortlessly.

John: This could go on for awhile. But to answer your question, yes, I was surprised. Amazed, thrilled, and surprised. It’s all a bit of a blur.

Diane: Your speech was frequently quoted over the next few days: you said that of everything the film had done for you, the most important was that it brought Sherlock into your life.

John: Easily. *To a Stranger* reawakened my love of acting, won me an Academy Award, and gave me the chance to reinvent my career. Those things are all important, and significant. But this...[he takes Sherlock’s hand] This is what’s going to make the rest of my life meaningful, this is what makes me truly happy. And this is forever.
Diane: You sound very confident about that.

John: I am.

Diane: Sherlock, your own reaction to John’s win got a strong response as well.

Sherlock: I’m sure I don’t know why. People seemed surprised to see me visibly affected. If seeing the man I love accepting an Oscar is not an occasion to show my feelings, then I don’t know what is.

Diane: How did it feel to see him up there?

Sherlock: As soon as I realized how gifted John was, all I wanted was for the rest of the world to see it, too. I wanted them all to know that they were wrong about him, as I had been wrong. As my feelings for him changed, that desire shifted and became a desire to see him happy, and acknowledged for the great actor that he is. So to see him holding an Oscar was the fulfillment of that wish. Then to hear him say what he said....[he hesitates] The truth is that I am the lucky one here. I am blessed with the company and affection of a good, decent, talented man who is patient and generous. He, on the other hand, must tolerate my numerous character failings, and I used to worry that he’d wake up one day and realize that there wasn’t much in this for him, and that would be that.

[John is looking away, blinking hard]

Diane: John, what are you thinking right now?

John: That for as brilliant as he is, he is profoundly stupid.

Sherlock: Note that I said I used to worry about that. I’m a rational man, and John married me of his own free will. Therefore, even though I still think I’ve got the better part of this relationship, I accept that he is committed to it.

John: I am. And you know why, because I’ve told you why.

Sherlock: Knowing the reason why and believing it are two different things.

Diane: Take us through those first few weeks after the Oscars.

John: The first day was pretty chaotic. I had two insanely early live feeds, and I was on Leno that evening. I barely had time to breathe. Sherlock was my hero. He made me take a nap and forced food on me, shuttled me around and took me to The Ivy for dinner after the Leno taping.

Sherlock: When the maître’d led us to our table, John got a round of applause from the entire dining room.

John: It was sweet. Embarrassing, but sweet.

[Diane holds up the post-Oscar issue of Entertainment Weekly; the cover features several photos from the evening, the largest of which is the photograph of John and Sherlock embracing]

Diane: This photo of you became iconic. Where was it taken?

John: That was at the Vanity Fair party, our last stop before heading home. That photo was everywhere for those first few weeks.

Diane: The Best Actor winner is usually inundated with script offers the very next day, but that
wasn’t your experience, is that right?

**John:** Oh, I received a lot of offers, just not of the right sort. I couldn’t be seen to be pandering, or to be accepting smaller roles than I’d previously taken, or I’d look desperate. The sorts of roles I wanted were not being offered to me. My agent was unable to get me meetings for scripts I was interested in. I had to face the fact that my relationship might well be the end of my career as I knew it.

**Diane:** Did you ever consider ending the relationship?

**John:** No. Absolutely not. But I did consider that I might need to make a change. If Hollywood was no longer an option, I thought I would return to London. Work for the BBC, work on the stage. There is a lot of excellent, high-quality work to be had there, and one’s choice of life partner isn’t as much of a concern. But give up Sherlock in order to help my marketability? It never entered my mind. I did worry about what my lack of work would do to us, though.

**Diane:** In what way?

**John:** Sherlock was working; in fact, he had signed on for the sort of project he’d long dreamed of. I had no prospects. I was glad for him, and thrilled about his project, but I could sense that if I did not find work of my own, the resentment was waiting for me. I’m only human, and I’ve lost count of how many Hollywood couples I’ve seen disintegrate that way. One career takes off while the other stagnates, and it kills the relationship. I was not about to let that happen to us. I’d quit the business first.

**Diane:** How long did it take for things to turn around for you?

**John:** Four weeks after the Oscars, I received exactly the offer I’d been hoping for.

**Diane:** And what was that?

**John:** I was offered the lead role in Joel and Ethan Coen’s next film. I could not have asked for a better, more exciting film to begin this new phase of my acting life. My character is like no man I’ve ever played, or have ever seen anyone else play, for that matter, and I can’t wait to sink my teeth into it.

**Diane:** It sounds like a great deal will depend on how this film is received.

**John:** Yes, it will, but I trust Joel and Ethan. Their script is funny, it’s macabre, it’s unexpected, and the rest of the cast is fantastic. I think it’s a winner. Their faith in me and my ability to carry this film seems to have opened the floodgates, and more directors are calling. I’ve got another project lined up for after this one.

**Diane:** Sherlock, coming out didn’t have as detrimental an effect on your career as it did on John’s. Why is that?

**Sherlock:** That wasn’t entirely unexpected. John and I occupy--or used to occupy, I ought to say--very different niches as actors. His marketability was based on his appeal to women and mainstream audiences. Being gay would, frankly, have less of an impact on my career. John is correct about the effect it could have had on us if he had been unable to capitalize on the success of *To a Stranger*. I don’t know how well I would have handled it if his career had ended because he chose me.

**John:** Let’s hope we never have to find out. But it would be our problem to handle, not just yours.
**Sherlock:** He is always saying things like that. I’m not used to doing *anything* as part of a team. In fact, I’m known for my *lack* of team spirit.

**John:** You’re doing fine.

**Sherlock:** He says that now. Check back with us in a year.

**Diane:** So what is life like for you, now that you’re married and your careers are moving forward?

**John:** Well, we’ve only been married for a week. Life isn’t that different so far.

**Sherlock:** There was an ungodly amount of paperwork.

**Diane:** Do you feel different?

**John:** [looks at Sherlock; they both smile slowly] Yeah, we do. I didn’t think we would, but yeah. There’s something about exchanging those rings and saying the words. Those words have power.

**Sherlock:** The human race has placed irrational importance on litanies and incantations since language was invented. A marriage ceremony is just one of our most commonplace examples.

**John:** Well, it hasn’t made him more sentimental, as you can plainly tell.

**Sherlock:** It hasn’t made you more rational.

**John:** Was it supposed to? May I remind you that *you* were the one who proposed to *me*? So the irrational incantation was your idea.

**Sherlock:** I didn’t say I was immune to the effect, I just said it was irrational. I am capable of being irrational.

**John:** Diane, I hope you appreciate the revelation you just heard pass his lips.

**Diane:** [laughing] It’s all caught on tape. He can’t take it back.

**Sherlock:** For me, proposing marriage was simply the best way to convey to John my seriousness, and my commitment to creating a life with him.

**John:** And get half ownership of my house by default.

**Sherlock:** You already had half ownership of this one, it only seemed fair.

**Diane:** How about a few practical questions, then?

**John:** All right.

**Diane:** Who cooks?

**John:** I do. He’s rubbish at cooking.

**Sherlock:** John's an excellent cook, when he has the time.

**Diane:** Does that mean you do the dishes?
Sherlock: Naturally. Is that not the only fair arrangement?

Diane: Who takes up more closet space?

Sherlock: I'm afraid I must own that one.

John: You should see his collection of suits. And the shoes, my God.

Diane: Who's more romantic?

John and Sherlock: [at the same time] He is.

[they look at each other]

John: When he proposed to me, he gave me a pair of silver cuff links engraved with the date we met, in Roman numerals. I rest my case.

Sherlock: You flew across an ocean to declare yourself to me and announced your presence by secreting a flower in my closing-night bouquet.

John: You already had your own tickets to fly across that same ocean and declare yourself to me!

Sherlock: Yes, but I hadn’t prepared special floral arrangements as a signal.

John: Now you’re just grasping at straws.

Diane: All right, we'll call it a draw.

John: [laughs] Fair enough.

Diane: What’s ahead for you now?

Sherlock: We’re both filming over the summer. I’ll be in Prague for several months.

John: I’ll be filming in Los Angeles, so I don’t know if I’ll be able to visit him. It’ll be our first significant separation since Sherlock moved to the States last fall. I’m not looking forward to it.

Sherlock: We’re hoping to fit in some traveling first, perhaps a proper honeymoon.

John: New Zealand.

Sherlock: No, Sweden.

John: Hawaii.

Sherlock: I am not going to Hawaii.

John: He’s phobic about sunlight. Has to maintain that Edwardian heavy-cream complexion.

Sherlock: Honeymoon destination to be determined, apparently.

John: We’ll probably argue about it, never agree, give up and stay here.

Diane: Has there been any talk of starting a family?
**John:** Actually, no. We’ve not had that discussion. [he looks at Sherlock] That seems like a bit of an oversight, doesn’t it?

**Sherlock:** Are you desperately broody and just forgot to mention it? Because *that* seems like a bit of an oversight.

**John:** I am not particularly broody, no. But it’s an interesting thought.

**Sherlock:** As long as by “interesting” you mean “terrifying.”

**John:** [laughs] I think that discussion might have to wait for a later time.

**Diane:** You’re both in very different places than you were just a year ago. What is it that you hope for most in the future?

[they both look thoughtful]

**John:** I hope that we’re always able to balance our careers and our personal lives. I hope I can continue to support my family, and stay close to them. I hope I’m always able to do the work I love, and be a part of good films, even great films, and that I’ll always have Sherlock with me through all of it.

**Sherlock:** I hope for those things too, but more than anything else, I hope that I can be a good husband to John, and that we’ll always be as happy as we are now.

[John takes his hand again, smiling]

**John:** See that? I told you he was romantic.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

This epilogue is being posted at the same time as the final full-length chapter, Chapter 19, so be sure you don’t miss out on that chapter.

February 24th, 2013

Red carpets were always the same. That ocean of crimson under your feet, the camera flashes, the screaming fans with their signs, the lanyarded staff members and assistants and publicists, the reporters with their microphones and their questions—always the same inane questions. John was glad he wouldn’t have nearly as many stand-ups as he’d had the year before; tonight he was just a presenter, neither he nor Sherlock were up for anything but perhaps a stale Bruce Vilanch joke at their expense. Last year, they’d been the biggest entertainment story around. Now, they were delightfully old news.

The cheers of the crowd hit him like a physical blow when he and Sherlock climbed out of their car. He waved as they walked up the carpet hand in hand, greeting a few of their colleagues, pausing for photos.

“Boring,” Sherlock muttered, as they stood there awash in camera flashes. “Do they not get weary of photographs of us in tuxedos?”

“Apparently not,” John said, his smile unwavering. “If you’re bored, do some people for me.”

“Which people shall I ‘do’ for you?”

They moved slowly down the carpet, carried along in the crush of formalwear. “Umm...that bloke there, with the earring.”

“Film student. Part-time job as a publicist’s assistant. Lives in the Valley, has a small dog that isn’t house-trained.”

“Now that woman with the pink thing.”

“Someone’s relative, most likely a mother of someone in the tech arts categories. Mmm...I think production design. Possibly art direction.”

“John! Sherlock!”

They turned, and John grinned and embraced Ellen while Sherlock got an armful of Portia, then they swapped and repeated the process. He was dimly aware of many flashes going off--so much gay royalty in one spot!--but put it out of his mind. “I was hoping I’d see you tonight,” John said. “Am I coming on the show? The studio’s still working out my press schedule.”

“I’d love to get you on, always,” Ellen said, beaming at them.

“All right, I’ll make sure I get there. We were thinking that, well....” He glanced at Sherlock. “Now might be a good time for that joint appearance.”
Her eyes widened. “Don’t tease me, John.”

“Irene thinks it’s a great idea. I’m sure we can work it out.”

“Okay! We’ll make it happen! Awesome!”

Portia waved them all together, hauling out her phone. “Photo op!” she said, grinning. Ellen grabbed them around their shoulders, standing on tiptoe to fling an arm over Sherlock, who had to stoop quite a bit, and they smiled for Portia’s camera.

They exchanged hugs again and separated. Irene was guiding them towards the Access Hollywood camera. “First of three,” she muttered as they approached. “Keep it brief. Billy will probably mention the Globes.”

One thing John had always appreciated about Billy Bush was that he wasted no time. He shook their hands briefly, and then got right down to it. “I’m here with last year’s Best Actor winner John Watson, who is a presenter tonight. John, how’s it different than being a nominee?”

“It’s a lot less nerve-wracking. I don’t feel like I might vomit, which is a nice change.”

“And who’s your date?” Billy said, winking.

“No idea. He followed me here from Starbucks.”

Sherlock smirked. “You looked so sad, buying a latte in your tuxedo, all alone. I thought you could use a plus-one.”

“Sherlock, congratulations on your Golden Globe win last month!”

“Thank you. But I’m not here for myself; I’m just John’s trophy husband tonight.”

“John, you’ll be presenting the Best Actress award tonight. Any predictions?”

“They were all fantastic performances. My only prediction is that I’ll be very happy to get a hug from any one of them.”

“Thanks for stopping by! Enjoy the show!”

“No problem, Billy.” They moved on down the carpet.

“Starbucks?” Sherlock murmured in his ear.

“Trophy husband?”

Sherlock didn’t have time to answer before they were being hailed again. “Hey, the best-looking couple in tuxes,” said Joe, snapping their photo with his iPhone. John grabbed the phone, ducked around and slung one arm around Joe’s shoulders to take another photo of them.

“Be sure and tweet that, I expect to see myself trending tonight,” John said. “Going to try and get snaps with as many nominees as possible. Hoping to start a #photobombjohn hashtag.” They laughed. “First nomination, Joe. Congratulations, the film was spectacular.”

“Thanks. I’m not going to win, though.”

“No, you’re not,” Sherlock said. “Good on you for accepting it now.”
“You’re so fucking cheerful, Sherlock.”

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“Realism is the less heartbreaking outlook.”

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“Jesus, John, how do you stand it? I mean, he’s cute and all, but damn.”

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John laughed. “Haven’t you heard? It’s a publicity stunt.”

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“Must be the longest one on record.”

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“Have you seen Leo? I think he should be my next photobomb victim.”

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“I just saw him, I think he’s up there by the little platform whatever thingie. Oh, and watch out, Mel is here.”

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“Why is that cause for caution?” Sherlock said, frowning.

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“Oh, you didn’t hear? He told Paul that he was going to come as late as he could tonight so he wouldn’t run into ‘those British queens’.”

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Sherlock snorted. “And that’s he’s either stupid or self-centered enough to say such a thing to Paul, who he must know is a friend of ours.”

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“I know, we will. Good luck tonight,” John said.

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He and Sherlock continued on, pausing for photos now and then. “Is it my imagination, or has the frenzy for photographs of us died down a bit?” John said.

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“Not your imagination. Newer and shinier targets have supplanted us.”

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“Thank God. It took long enough.” They moved off down the carpet again. “I suppose we’re just another boring Hollywood couple now.”

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“Was that not the whole point?”

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John stopped. He looked out at the camera banks, the reporters, the screaming fans. Some of them were holding signs, mostly for this years’ nominees, but he spotted a few for him and Sherlock. He waved at the bleachers, getting a surge of shouts and cheers in return. He saw a young man blow him a kiss; he pointed at him and winked. The young man pretended to faint.

“John?”

“John?”

Sherlock had stopped a few yards further along and was looking back at him. John was frozen to the spot, momentarily overwhelmed by his own life.

Jesus Christ, John. You’re at the Oscars for the second time in as many years. And why are you back this year? Because you fucking WON last year. These cheers you’re hearing? They’re for you. That career rebirth you’d all but given up on? You’ve got it. That solitary life you’d resigned yourself to? A distant memory. Joke’s on you, Johnny. See that gorgeous chap who looks like he strolled off the cover of GQ? The one currently looking at you like you’ve gone mad? He’s your
husband. Try not to look too addle-brained, you’re on national television.

John shook his head a bit and met Sherlock’s eyes; the nonverbal exchange was fast. Where did you go just now?

Just having a moment. All’s well.

All right, then?

Yeah, fine, I’ll tell you later.

Right, tell me later.

Sherlock held out his hand. John walked forward and took it, and they resumed their course down the carpet. “Are you still bored?”

“Excruciatingly,” Sherlock said, but his eyes were twinkling and his thumb was stroking the back of John’s hand.

“All right, then. Do him, the one with the hat.”

“Is that all I am to you? A performing bear for your amusement? Cheap entertainment?”

“No, of course not, you’re also a pretty good shag. Although I suppose that could also be considered cheap entertainment.”

Sherlock shook his head, sighing in mock irritation. “What has become of my life?” he mused.

“Same thing that’s become of mine.” John stretched up and kissed him. He heard cheers and shrieks and a flurry of cameras clicking, but paid them no mind. “I love you,” he murmured.

“I love you, too.” Sherlock smiled at him. “Now, which one did you want me to do? The one with the hat?”

THE END

I have some folks I’d like to thank here at the end. First of all my amazing beta, tzikeh. You guys have no idea. For their unwavering support and willingness to let me talk at them about story points I must also thank fandom girlfriends mariemjs, moony, mazarin221b, my Britpicker Kayleigh, my Hollywood Insider Crystal, and most of all, every one of you readers for the encouragement and comments. Many thanks also to anyone who’s ever drawn fanart of this story; there’s been some great stuff. I plan to make an art masterpost at some point.

I’m not done with Actor!John-and-Sherlock. All my ficcing will be taking a brief hiatus while new episodes air, but once the furor has died down, there’ll be new fic from me, namely the Genie’s Blog “origin story,” and additional stories that follow along from “Performance,” most notably John and Sherlock’s wedding, which I suspect some of you may be disappointed not to have seen in this story. Patience!

My deepest, humblest thanks, and I’ll see you all soon!
Works inspired by this one: Cover- Performance in A Leading Role by mad_lori by blanketforyourshock, Movie still: To A Stranger by RedOrchid, Future Yesterday by ladymac111

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