Johnloctober

by prettysailorsoldier

Summary

31 days of autumnal Johnlock with prompts from all of you! There will be a bit of everything, but you can check the tags for more specifics.

For a summary of every chapter, as well as individual tags, click here.
As You Wish

Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** Sherlock and John at a Halloween party, wearing super attractive costumes, and (here comes the cliche) they end up playing seven minutes in heaven or some such party game - curlock-holmes

Sherlock can't seem to stop thinking about the new employee at the coffee shop near campus, but can never manage to say anything more than "Black, two sugars, please." That is, until they end up at the same Halloween party. Good thing he's wearing a mask!

In which Sherlock is Dread Pirate Roberts, John is Clark Kent, and Irene is the real hero.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock tugged at his black mask, huffing in exasperation. “This is so uncomfortable!” he snarled, rounding on the girl to his left. “Why did you give me this stupid thing?”

“Because you’re not Dread Pirate Roberts without a mask,” Irene snipped through her red-painted lips. “You’d just be…Mildly-Disliked Pirate Roberts. Or Zorro.”

Sherlock snorted, rattling his head, and then looked back over the woman, scanning down the tight black ensemble—more cutouts than fabric—to where her red heels were clicking against the pavement. “What are you supposed to be again?” he asked, eyebrow rising.

“Dominatrix,” Irene replied, slapping her whip demonstratively against her palm, a scarlet grin stretching across her face.

“Oh, so you’re not dressing up then?” Sherlock quipped airily, and Irene laughed.

“Careful, Sherlock,” she smirked, turning the whip over in her hand, “or I’ll have to test this on you.”

“Go ahead,” he replied, chuckling. “It’s clearly cheap plastic; it’d break before it would hurt me.”

“Spoilsport,” Irene scolded, but she was still smiling. “You could at least pretend to be turned on.”

Sherlock barked a laugh. “My apologies. Should I get on my knees? Call you my dark mistress or something?”

“High Queen of Cock Rings will do.”

Sherlock nearly tripped on his own feet, regaining his balance to a soundtrack of Irene’s high-pitched laughter.

“Oh, god, you are so bad at this gay thing,” Irene laughed, shaking her head, and Sherlock glared at her.
“I don’t think an affinity for...that was a condition of membership,” he muttered, and Irene giggled.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she sighed, giving him a disconcertingly sympathetic smile, “what ever will I do with you? There’s only six months left until I graduate, and I have barely made a dent in your virtue.”

“My virtue!?” Sherlock blustered, but Irene only nodded sagely.

“I’ve been doing my best,” she said, shaking her head ruefully, “but you’re a terrible student. Like with that guy at the library.”

“He was studying drama, Irene. Drama!” Sherlock railed, but it had little effect.

“So?” Irene muttered. “I’d have thought that would make you perfect for one another. Couple of drama queens,” she added with a grin, and Sherlock’s jaw clicked.

“He followed me around for a month,” he snarled, and Irene waved her hand dismissively.

“He’s an artistic type,” she excused.

“Yeah, I got that when he gave me a ten-page poem about my eyes!” Sherlock exclaimed, and Irene laughed.

“All right, that was a bit weird, I’ll give you that,” she chuckled, waving a finger at him.

“It was certifiable!” Sherlock spluttered, and she laughed harder. “I’m telling you, if he hadn’t taken up with that Moran guy, he’d be making voodoo dolls out of my discarded tissues or something.”

Irene grabbed onto his shoulder, her steps slowing to shuffling as she bent with laughter. “Okay, that wasn’t my best pick,” she wheezed once she was able, and Sherlock scoffed in agreement, “but, seriously, I wanna know.” She twined her arm through his, rattling him lightly as she pressed companionably into his side. “How goes the love life?”

“How goes global warming?” Sherlock murmured, and Irene shook him again.

“No, come on,” she coaxed. “I’m serious. What about coffee-shop-guy?”

“He has a name, you know,” Sherlock half-heartedly chided, smiling when Irene sniffed.

“I know, but I can never remember it, and you called him coffee-shop-guy when you first told me about it.”

“A lapse in judgment I will be sure to never repeat,” Sherlock swore into the crisp autumn air, and Irene elbowed his ribs. “I dunno, it’s nothing, really,” he continued, shrugging. “I order the coffee, he makes the coffee, we exchange pleasantries, and then I go home and bang my head against a wall.”

Irene laughed, her head leaning into his shoulder. “You must talk though. I mean, it’s been a month.”

It had actually been a month and 10 days, but Irene would tease him forever if he corrected her, so he suppressed that particular instinct. “We talk a bit,” Sherlock admitted, shrugging the shoulder she wasn’t pressed against. “Names. Degrees. What year we’re in. Just the basics.”

“Do those basics ever include you wanting him to bend you over the pastry case and-”

“Shh!” Sherlock hissed, eyes shifting frantically around the street, which was growing more and
more crowded as they neared the friend-of-a-friend-of-Irene’s house where the Halloween party was being held. “No, they do not,” he muttered down into her hair.

“But do you want him to?” Irene goaded, turning her face to grin salaciously up at him, and Sherlock turned his head away, sending her into a smug chuckle. “Why don’t you just ask him out?” she questioned after a moment, serious once more.

“I don’t know if he’s single or not,” Sherlock replied, as if that were remotely the main reason he was hesitant.

“So why don’t you ask that?” Irene supplied, which made an infuriating amount of sense.

“I-” he started, and then froze, his eyes catching on a group gathered at the bottom of the short staircase leading up to the front door.

There were five of them, three girls and two guys, and all had seemingly committed to the festivities. Two of the girls were obviously a couple, dressed as those two Batman villainesses Irene was always raving about—wasted opportunity for queer representation in media, or something like that. The remaining girl was clearly already or soon to be the significant other of the man standing across from her, a tall gentleman dressed as a knight, possibly intending to match her attire—some sort of princess, though why the dress was splattered half blue and half pink, Sherlock couldn’t say.

The other boy, in contrast, had gone rather tame. He was wearing a black suit, jacket hanging open, along with a blue-and-grey-striped tie draped over his neck, as if it had been undone but not yet pulled free. Beneath the jacket lay a white button-down, which was drawn apart in a V, exposing the shirt beneath, and even Sherlock, with all his lack of pop culture knowledge, recognized the symbol spread across his chest. He was also wearing glasses, thick black rims that did nothing for his face, but, even from this distance, it was impossible to mistake those eyes.

“Oh my god,” he breathed, wanting nothing more than to run, except he seemed to have lost feeling in his limbs.

“What?” Irene asked, tone concerned, and Sherlock watched as she turned in the periphery of his vision, attempting to follow his gaze.

“It’s him,” he breathed, almost subconsciously, as if processing his internal panic aloud.

“Him? Who are you- Wait, coffee-shop-guy!?” Irene blurted, and Sherlock let out a strangled sound, grabbing her by the shoulder and tugging her back around from looking.

“Shh! He’ll hear you!” he implored, casting a glance out of the corner of his eye to see if the outburst had been noticed. Conversation appeared to be continuing as normal, however, but Sherlock’s relief was short-lived, Irene twisting against his grip to get another look.

“Which one is he?” she whispered conspiratorially, craning her neck. “Clark Kent or the knight?”

“What?” Sherlock muttered, frowning in confusion. “He’s- The other one, not the knight.”

Irene nodded affirmatively, and Sherlock hesitantly loosened his grip, allowing her to turn and examine the man properly. “Well, well,” she drawled, eyes shifting up and down beneath her long black-cloaked lashes, “Superman indeed.”

“Stop it,” Sherlock snarled, turning her back. “He’ll see you.”

Irene rolled her eyes, huffing irritably, and then fixed him with a pointed look.
“What?” he murmured warily.

“'What?'” Irene mocked, exasperated. “Go talk to him!” she raged, flipping a hand back behind her.

“What? No!” Sherlock spluttered, recoiling from the suggestion. “I can’t just- No!”

“Why not?” Irene pressed, and Sherlock growled in frustration. “You just flirt! You can flirt; I’ve seen you flirt.”

“That was different,” Sherlock urged, shuffling a little closer to her as people passed nearby. “I needed to get into the chem lab after hours. It didn’t mean anything.”

“So pretend this doesn’t mean anything.”

“I can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Because- Because he plays rugby!” Sherlock sputtered, weeks of pent-up desperation breaking out on a liquor-and-vomit-soaked garden, as, he supposed, only made sense. “And he’s in the medicine program, and his eyes are obnoxiously blue, and-” He trailed away, mouth shifting around even more humiliating words that thankfully remained silent, but, even with the little he had exposed, Irene was staring wide-eyed up at him.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, looking between his eyes, “you’re completely gone on him!” She smiled gleefully, and Sherlock gaped at her, trying and failing to come up with a retort.

Finally, he closed his lips, sighing as he cast a look to the ground, defeated. “I don’t even know if he’s gay,” he said, shrugging helplessly as he peered through his lashes at the laughing blond across the lawn.

“Want me to go check?”

“What?” Sherlock muttered, forehead wrinkling down at her.

“This bustier adds two cup sizes,” she replied, shifting the aforementioned assets in unnecessary demonstration. “If he doesn’t go for that-”

“Oh, god, stop!” Sherlock spluttered, flapping his hands at her, and Irene laughed, shaking her head.

“Irene?”

Sherlock snapped his head up, one of the girls by the stairs having now turned toward them, the others following suit, including the one person Sherlock wanted very much not to be looking at him right now.

“Harry?” Irene replied, stepping closer, and then she broke into a broad smile. “Harry!” she exclaimed, giving Sherlock a sharp tug at the wrist to give him no choice but to follow. “I didn’t recognize you! Harley Quinn,” she mused, nodding appreciatively. “Very nice. And this must be your Poison Ivy,” she added, turning to the redhead girl standing beside the petite blonde apparently named Harry.

“Clara,” the girl interjected, smiling warmly as she extended a hand to Irene. “It’s good to meet you. Harry’s talked about you quite a bit.”

“All good things, I hope,” Irene quipped, raising an eyebrow at Harry, who laughed.
“Oh, yes, of course,” Clara was quick to reassure. “Says you’re the best president the LGBT Society has ever had.”

“Clara,” Harry murmured self-consciously, tucking her head toward her girlfriend’s shoulder.

“What? You did!” Clara laughed, shaking her head at the blonde.

“Yeah, well, I have only been here for one other president, so…” She trailed away with a shrug, a ripple of laughter roaming around the gathering.

“I’ll try not to let it go to my head,” Irene said, grinning, and then turned to the remainder of the group, who were hovering on the fringes, uncertain of their welcome. “And who are these fine young gentlemen,” she drawled, stealing a stealthy glance at Sherlock over her shoulder, and Sherlock wondered if that whip would at least hold up well enough for him to shove it down her throat.

“Oh, sorry,” Harry babbled, shifting her drink between her hands to gesture at the rest of their party. “This is Molly,” she began, pointing to the princess Sherlock had seen earlier, who gave a timid wave of greeting, “and this is her boyfriend, Greg.”

“Greg Lestrade,” the knight said, extending a hand, and then bowed low when Irene placed hers within it. “Pleasure to meet you, milady,” he pronounced as he rose, and Irene giggled while everyone else rolled their eyes.

“And Superman over there is my brother, John,” Harry concluded, and John Watson stepped forward and stopped Sherlock’s heart.

“Hey, trying to keep a secret identity over here!” John blustered jovially, beaming as he stretched a hand out to Irene. “John Watson. So, you’re Irene Adler,” he mused as their hands bobbed, but he quickly released Irene’s pale digits, and did not look down at her breasts.

Score one.

“I am,” Irene replied, groomed eyebrow rising skeptically. “Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” John chirped, shrugging as he smirked down into his plastic cup. “It’s just nice to finally put a face to the name. Harry really does talk about you a lot, and I saw that write-up about you in the paper last month. Something about a ‘Slut Walk’?”

Irene nodded. “Yeah, they tried to cancel it. Claimed it was ‘inappropriate’,” she snipped, curling her fingers around the words.

“That’s kind of counterintuitive, isn’t it?” John murmured, tipping his head. “Slut-shaming a demonstration against slut-shaming?”

“Yes, exactly!” Irene urged, hands waving out toward John in that way they always did when the conversation was about to take an hour longer than anyone wanted, and Sherlock sniffed faintly, a warning only audible to Irene. “Anyway, it all worked out,” she continued, flicking a hand in dismissal. “We’re doing it next Saturday. Oh, that reminds me!” She turned to Sherlock, who blinked down at her, terrified and perplexed. “We need a new slogan. ‘A slut above the rest’ just doesn’t have the right ring to it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, are you in the club too?” Harry blurted, bringing a hand to her chest in embarrassment. “I can’t tell, what with the mask and everything.”
“No, I-” Sherlock started, but Irene interjected, placing a palm on his arm.

“No, he refuses to join,” she said, shooting up a saccharine smile. “Says he doesn’t have the time.”

“Actually, I believe it was the leadership I objected to,” Sherlock muttered, and everyone laughed as Irene sneered at him.

She then turned back to the group, hand gesturing at his chest, and Sherlock’s mind spun, searching for a solution to the inevitable problem. “This is my friend—"

“Sam,” Sherlock interjected, hoping it didn’t sound nearly as frantic as he felt, and Irene gave him a curious look, half quizzical, half amused. He lifted his hand in a weak flick toward the group. “Sam Hol-...ston.”

Irene snorted, and Sherlock tried to simultaneously ignore her and will her straight to hell.

“Don’t I know you?”

Sherlock swallowed hard, forcing his head to turn slowly, casually, as well as ordering his knees not to fail.

John’s eyes were fixed in his face, brow furrowed as he scanned over Sherlock’s mostly obscured features. “From class or something?”

There really ought to be more air, considering they were outside. “No, I-I don’t think so,” he forced out, his voice drifting to his ears as if through water.

“The coffee shop, maybe?” John pressed, and all of Sherlock’s internal organs were swept down in an icy plummet. “The one on Varden? I work there through the week.”

“You’ve been there, haven’t you, Sam?” Irene purred, batting her lashes up at him. “Isn’t that the place with the lattes you’re always talking about?”

He could almost hear his face cracking with effort as he smiled nonchalantly back at her, hoping she could read the promises of bodily harm he was trying to convey through his eyes. “No,” he clipped airily, blinking away from her to shake his head at John, “I don’t believe I’ve ever been.”

“Huh,” John mused, still considering him. “Might just be because I watched The Princess Bride last week,” he finally chuckled, and Sherlock’s lungs remembered how to work as he laughed too, indescribably relieved at the reprieve.

“Well, should we go inside?” Greg spoke up, waving in wide gesture to the front door, his plastic armor clicking. “Get you two some drinks?” he added, pointing between Irene and Sherlock’s empty hands.

“Don’t have to ask me twice!” Irene replied, and they all laughed, heading inside—regrettably—together.

“What the hell are you doing!?” Sherlock hissed, bending down to Irene’s ear as they hung back.

“Helping,” she crooned, shrugging innocently, but a twitch of her painted mouth betrayed the pronouncement.

“Oh, really?” Sherlock bit back. “Well, maybe later you’ll allow me to return the favor by helping you in front of a lorry!”
“Calm down, Sherlock,” Irene groaned, rolling her eyes while Sherlock’s widened, but no one appeared to have heard the name. “It’s a party! Have a drink. Get laid.” She shrugged, hands flipping through the air. “You’re wearing a mask, so nobody will know it’s you and run for the hills.”

“Charming,” Sherlock muttered drily, and Irene beamed.

“I try. But, really, Sherlock.” She stopped, moving in front of him, her hands wrapping loosely around his elbows. “Have fun!” she cajoled, rattling his arms. “You hardly ever get out. Just… promise me you’ll give it a chance?”

Sherlock looked down at the woman, ever his friend in spite of how many ways he had plotted her murder. Reluctantly, he sighed. “As you wish,” he murmured, knowing it would make her laugh, and she did, clapping him on the arm before pulling away.

“That’s the spirit! Channel that Dread Pirate Roberts and go nab yourself some booty!” She flashed him a lascivious wink, and Sherlock was suddenly laughing in spite of himself.

“Go!” he implored, pushing her lightly away, and she grinned over her shoulder at him as she made her way toward the beverage table across the room. He watched after her, shaking his head, and then blinked, a sudden thought causing him to call out. “Irene!” he beckoned, and she turned, expectant. “Put up or slut up?” he suggested, tipping his head, and she snapped her fingers, pointing at him approvingly.

“Remind me of that when you’re holding my hair back tomorrow!” she shouted, and Sherlock laughed, watching her disappear into the throng.

“That’s pretty good.”

Sherlock jumped, heart skittering around in his chest before he had even consciously placed the voice.

John smiled up at him, offering a red plastic cup that appeared to be only coke. “You always come up with the slogans?”

“Er, um, no,” Sherlock stammered, taking the proffered drink with barely trembling fingers. “Only when all of her ideas are terrible.”

John laughed, and it was like slipping into hot water after being out in the cold, that strange sensation of pins and needles prickling down from Sherlock’s scalp to his toes. “That happen often?” he asked, sipping from his own cup—which smelled like Sprite, but Sherlock couldn’t rule out some variety of Fanta.

“Not if you ask her,” Sherlock replied, making John laugh again, and Sherlock hoped he could prolong this miracle of apparently being entertaining as long as possible, or at least until he could procure a recording of that sound.

“You two know one another pretty well, huh?” John supposed, and Sherlock nodded, sipping at his drink, which turned out to be Diet Coke. Coke Zero? Would it be rude to ask?

He let it go. “I suppose,” he answered, shrugging. “We met my first year.”

“What year are you in now?”

“Second,” Sherlock answered, forgetting he was supposed to be lying about everything, but surely
something like that was simple enough not to give him away. “Though it seems a lot longer than that, now that I’m thinking of it,” he added, and John chuckled.

“How’d you meet?” he asked, and Sherlock turned, unaccustomed to people wanting to engage him in conversation for this long, but John didn’t look perturbed, his eyes bright as he awaited a reply.

“Well,” Sherlock began hesitantly, stalling with another drink, “she, er- She sort of…inquired as to if I would be amenable to-“

“Wait, she asked you out!?” John concluded, bursting into laughter as Sherlock bit his lip, embarrassed. “How did that turn out?”

“It didn’t,” Sherlock supplied, shrugging. “She’s not exactly...my type.”

Sherlock wasn’t quite in the closet, but he wasn’t entirely out of it either. Irene often likened him to a cat that sits in a doorway, refusing to move so you can close the door, but also refusing to decide which side they want to be on, but Sherlock disagreed, not least of all because he was a person, thank you very much. The problem wasn’t in people knowing he was gay, it was in telling people he was gay, but maybe Irene was on to something: Masks really did make everything easier.

“Ah,” John mused, evidently understanding, and then quickly ducked his head into his cup, a twitch playing at the corner of his mouth. “Oh well,” he sighed theatrically after a moment, shrugging. “I suppose some things just aren’t meant to be.”

“No,” Sherlock chuckled, “I suppose not.”

They lapsed into silence, though not the uncomfortable ones Sherlock had more experience with, and John lingered there beside him, another thing Sherlock was not particularly adept at dealing with. What did you say to people when they wanted to talk to you for longer than five minutes?

“So, what are you studying?”

“Chemistry,” Sherlock blurted, and then bit the inside of his cheek to cut off a profanity, the truth coming out unchecked in his panic.

John only nodded in acknowledgment, however, no dawning comprehension sparking in his eyes. “Three-year?” he asked, and Sherlock shook his head, in for a penny and whatnot.

“No, the four-year one,” he amended, and John nodded again.

“Guess you’re almost halfway through, then,” he said, smile warm as his eyes twinkled, and Sherlock could only nod dumbly for a moment.

“Yeah, um, and you?” he squeaked, taking a rather large swig of his some-derivative-of-coke to cover his awkwardness.

“Third year,” John replied, rather happily considering the topic was academia. “Medicine. So I’m about a month shy of halfway,” he added with a small laugh, and Sherlock smiled in response.

“You like it? Medicine?” he asked, surprisingly himself somewhat, but the conversation flowed easily with John, always had. Of course, it had never gone much further than preliminary introductions and observations about the weather, but, for Sherlock, even that was an achievement.

“Yeah,” John answered, nodding eagerly. “I mean, I’ve wanted to be a doctor since I was a little kid, so-” He halted, brow furrowing out at seemingly nothing before he looked up to Sherlock with an
airy chuckle. “But I guess you don’t need my origin story,” he joked, and Sherlock rattled his head.

“No, it’s...it’s fine,” he murmured, because, shockingly, he wanted to know superfluous details about John. What was his favorite color? What toothpaste did he use? What did his voice sound like when he first woke up in the woah, okay, enough of that!

“Well, alright,” John chuckled, turning to face him more directly, and Sherlock wondered if he looked at everyone that way, like they were the only person of any interest in all the world. “Your turn then. What did you want to be when you were a kid?”

Sherlock chuckled, ducking his head a moment. “Actually,” he murmured, tapping his fingers against the side of his cup, “I wanted to be a pirate.”

John blinked at him a moment, a slow smile blooming on his face, and then burst into laughter. “Seriously?” he gushed, and Sherlock shrugged. “Wow,” he breathed, shaking his head, “so I’m witnessing a dream come true right now.”

“You really are,” Sherlock replied, the corners of his mouth straining as he tried to keep his grin in check.

John laughed, and Sherlock joined him, his stomach performing a circus act against his sides.

Was this flirting? Was he flirting? It really wasn’t so hard after all. Of course, now that he was thinking about it, he became hyperaware of his hands.

“Oi!”

They both looked up to find Irene pushing through the crowd toward them, Harry and Clara being dragged along behind her in a serpentine chain.

“You!” she barked, pointing a wobbly finger at Sherlock. “We need- We need you. And you,” she added, her hand and eyes lazily shifting to John, who lifted an eyebrow, clearly suppressing a smirk.

“Oh, for the love of- We’ve been here ten minutes!” Sherlock spouted, shaking his head at her.

“How are you drunk already?”

“Dedication,” Irene replied with a firm nod, and John choked on his drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he resurfaced from his cup. “Now, come on, we need more people.” She grabbed his arm, attempting to turn back and pull him along, but he stood firm.

“More people for what?” he asked, and she lolled her head back to him.

“Seven minutes in heaven,” she asserted, the way one might passingly comment on the sun being especially bright that day, but Sherlock’s mouth dropped open.

“What?” he squawked, attempting to shake off her hand. “No! Irene, I’m not-”

“Oh, yes you are,” she countered, giving him a hard tug, and he stumbled forward a halting stride.

“Irene! Irene, what are you-”

“Irene! Irene, what are you-”

“Come on, Buttercup!” she clipped, beginning to drag him across the room, John’s laughter following at his back.

“That’s not-” he attempted, but Irene hissed him silent, and there was nothing left to do but relent, rolling his eyes as he slumped, allowing himself to be manhandled down to the floor in a rather
disconcertingly large circle in a corner of the living room.

“We’re drawing lots,” Irene explained, dropping a pen and notepad into his lap before handing down a bowl filled with folded scraps of paper. “Write your name down and put it in the bowl. We’re doing character names; easier that way. And I’m watching, so don’t try and write someone else’s.”

Sherlock glowered up at her, the group chuckling around them, and then he begrudgingly wrote ‘Dread Pirate Roberts’ at the bottom of the torn sheet, ripping his section off in a careful clean line.

“Thank you,” Irene chirped, taking his name and the supplies from him, and then she walked a short distance around the circle to where John had settled down, tossing Sherlock’s slip in before handing the bowl, the notepad, and the pen down to the blond.

John repeated the process, creasing his ‘Clark Kent’ label in half before dropping it into the container, and then Irene fluttered away, stepping around legs as she made her way to the center of the circle, her usual place of preference.

“Alright, who wants to go first?” she asked, and so it began, the bowl sitting in the middle of the group as person after person drew a name and then disappeared into what appeared to be a coat closet.

The countdown had begun at the suggested seven minutes, but that proved far too boring for the bystanders, so it was gradually whittled down to two, though people still managed to reemerge in an almost impressive state of dishevelment.

Sherlock watched it all mildly removed, probably for the sake of self-preservation. When he thought about it too much, considered that bowl getting closer and closer to John—who it would get to before him—his stomach threatened to empty itself on the angel sitting next to him, whose sultry sidelong glances probably weren’t doing anything to help the situation. He found himself hoping to pull Irene from the bowl, which was truly a mark of how desperate the situation was, but all thought ground to a halt when the bowl finally made it to John, who took it with a good-natured grin.

“For the record,” he announced, lifting a hand for attention, “if I get my sister, I’m redrawing!”

There was a chorus of cheers and laughter, and then he lowered his hand into the container, Sherlock snapping his head away, unable to watch.

A second later, he jumped, the sudden jeers deafening, and he nearly toppled over as the man sitting next to him—one of four James Bonds at the party—elbowed him in the arm. He blinked, looking around, bemused, a sick sensation building in his gut as he noticed all the eyes that were on him. One particular set of blue ones garnered his attention, however, and John smirked sheepishly at him, a scrap of paper caught between his fingers as he lifted them up by his face.

“Sorry, Buttercup,” he quipped, smirk breaking into a grin, and Sherlock laughed, high and stilted and terrified.

It was all a bit chaotic after that, his mind unable to focus cleanly on the hands hustling him along—although he thought he caught a whiff of Irene’s perfume—and then, quite suddenly, it was dark, and he was regaining his footing, catching himself on someone’s mother’s poor abused trench coat.

He turned, John’s silhouette practically pressed up against the door, his feet casting shadows in the shaft of light coming in from beneath the wood. Sherlock opened his mouth, but no sound came out, and he only breathed for a long moment, wondering if John could hear the heartbeat that was now thundering in his ears.
John didn’t say anything either, didn’t so much as move, and several seconds later Sherlock’s vision adjusted enough to see his face, an impassive mask staring at him in the dim.

“Um,” Sherlock muttered, his tongue going rogue, “er… Wh-Wha-

“Sam?” John interjected, not that Sherlock was saying anything important, and Sherlock blinked, confused by the disdain in his voice. “Seriously? Sam?”

Sherlock’s throat creaked as it closed, and he swallowed to clear it, his hands beginning to shake. “I-I don’t under-

John sighed, bowing his head as he plucked off his glasses. “Sherlock,” he clipped, folding the eyewear neatly before slipping them into his pocket, “shut up.”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open, his lungs emptying in a wheeze as John’s words landed like a punch to the gut, and he was still gathering his faculties when everything abruptly spun, his body wrenched sideways and back as he slammed into the wall. He gasped, blinking in an attempt to refocus, but all he saw was a swiftly moving shadow before John’s mouth fell on his.

There was no sense in lying to himself, he had thought about kissing John Watson. He had thought about what he would taste like, if he would be warm or gentle or rough. He had wondered if he would grab his waist, twist his hair, or do that really awkward palm-on-the-cheek thing that was always more restrictive and clammy than romantic. He had considered a lot of things about kissing John Watson, but he had never expected to actually be able to confirm any of them, and, as it turned out, kissing John Watson exceeded any and all expectations.

For one thing, John was not gentle. Not that he was overly rough either, but he didn’t waste much time before grazing past Sherlock’s lips, tracing in a tauntingly slow circle before pushing against Sherlock’s still-shocked tongue. One hand was on Sherlock’s hip, holding him flush, and the other quickly anchored itself in his curls, tugging just enough to tease a moan free from Sherlock’s throat, and, with that, Sherlock’s mind once again aligned with his body, and he was kissing John back, hands clutching into the suit jacket at the man’s sides as he matched the pressure of his tongue.

Eventually, however—still woefully incapable of anaerobic respiration—they broke apart, pants interspersed with open-mouthed presses as they eased down. A few moments later, gentle fingers gingerly brushed against his cheekbone, and Sherlock lowered his head, easing the process as John briefly lifted up his mask.

The man chuckled airily, smiling at him. “Just checking,” John murmured, ducking back down to kiss him again as he spluttered in affront, and Sherlock supposed he could forgive him.

“How did you know?” he asked, and John pulled further away, though his hands remained connected.

“You have a rather distinct voice,” he answered, smiling softly as his hand moved from Sherlock’s hair to trace across his jaw. “I mean, the mask threw me for a second, I’ll admit,” he muttered with a small shrug, “but I could still see your eyes.” He painted a gentle stripe across Sherlock’s cheekbone with his thumb, and Sherlock’s eyelids fluttered shut as his breath hitched. “And these ridiculous lips,” he added, almost frustrated as his thumb moved to sweep along the bottom line of Sherlock’s mouth. “Seriously, these are absurd. You shouldn’t be allowed out in public like this; it’s not fair.”

Sherlock chuckled, a biologically impossible balloon inflating in his chest as he ducked his head, his fingers fidgeting in the folds of John’s jacket.
“And then you wanted to play seven minutes in heaven?” John sputtered belligerently, and Sherlock laughed outright. “Cruel. Positively barbaric.”

“I didn’t want to. And you played too,” Sherlock reminded, but John only scoffed.

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t about to let somebody else kiss you,” John muttered, staking his claim on Sherlock’s mouth in another brief press.

“You didn’t know it was going to be you,” Sherlock snipped. “There were at least a dozen people in that circle. Any one of them could have—” He trailed away, taking in the withering look John was giving him. “Wait, you—You knew?” he asked, and John lifted an eyebrow, as if he really thought Sherlock ought to have caught onto this ages ago. “But—But how? It was a random drawing; there’s no way you could’ve—”

“I palmed yours,” John interrupted, smiling, evidently quite proud of his subterfuge. “I watched Irene put your name in, and then, when I put mine in, I took yours back out. Then I just waited.” He shrugged, as if this were an everyday occurrence, something Sherlock hoped dearly was not the case.

“I—You—” Sherlock blinked at him, struck entirely speechless, but John seemed to hear him anyway, and smiled, dropping a tender kiss to Sherlock’s lips.

Suddenly, there was a loud banging on the door, and they jumped, startling apart at the reminder of a whole rest-of-the-world out there.

“Alright, lovebirds, break it up!” Irene’s voice broke in. “We got an angel and James Bond out here who need to use the facilities!”

John chuckled, shaking his head down at the floor, whereas Sherlock just bit his lip, feeling his face flush. “Ya know,” he drawled, smirking as he peered up at Sherlock from coy, downturned eyes, “they don’t have any food here.”

“What?” Sherlock murmured, tilting his head.

John grinned openly a moment, and then returned to his nonchalant act. “They have a lot of drinks, but no food. And that diner near campus is open 24 hours.”

Sherlock blinked, frowning, and John sighed, dropping his head. When he lifted his face, a fond smile was plastered across it, and Sherlock sent up a prayer to anyone or anything that was listening that he would get to see that at least several thousand times more.

“I’m asking you to leave the party and come get a cheeseburger with me,” he explained, and Sherlock’s entire body might have hit the ceiling, or perhaps just his stomach.

“Oh,” he squeaked, nuclear-caliber heat rushing up from his chest, but John’s laugh eased the panic somewhat.

“Is that a yes?” he chuckled, and Sherlock, after several failed attempts to vocalize, merely nodded. “Alright, good.” John said, bobbing his head, his eyes shining even in the gloom. “I’ll just say goodbye to a few people, and then we’ll go, okay?”

Sherlock nodded, and then spoke when the movement began to make him dizzy. “Yeah, er, o-okay.”

John grinned, and then beckoned him with a hand, moving to the door.
The light was blinding when they first emerged, John actually hissing in pain, and Sherlock blinked quickly to clear the spots as he tried to identify who exactly was doing all that catcalling. Of course, to probably no one’s surprise, it was Irene and Harry, Irene latching quickly onto his arm while John moved the short distance away to talk to his sister.

“So?” Irene whispered conspiratorially, her eyes dancing with glee, and, though Sherlock turned his face away, battling down a smile, enough of it leaked through to make her grin. “I knew it, I knew it! You’re welcome, by the way.”

“For what?” Sherlock snorted derisively.

Irene lifted her hand in response, a narrow slip of paper caught between two red-varnished nails. Mutely, Sherlock took it from her, unfolding the card to find the words ‘Clark Kent’ written in handwriting he’d grown quite familiar with over weeks of staring at his name scrawled on coffee cups in the same penmanship. He blinked down at it, lips parting, and then looked up to find Irene smirking at him.

“I saw John take yours,” she explained with a shrug. “Figured I’d level the playing field. I was gonna find an excuse to give it to you if you were up before him.”

Sherlock smiled, looking down at the paper as he folded it again. “Thank you,” he mumbled, trying to slip the scrap into his trouser pocket without the sentimentality being noticed, but Irene’s eyes followed the movement, her face lighting.

“Aw, it’s wuv!” she crooned, poking at his ribs with her index fingers. “Tru wuv!”

“Shh!” Sherlock hissed, but he was half laughing, swatting her hand away. “Stop it!”

Irene laughed, but did pull her hands away, and then her eyes drifted after Sherlock’s, which had, quite unintentionally, found John a few meters away, bent close as he spoke with his sister.

“Whatcha gonna do now?” Irene asked, turning her head up to him.

“Nothing,” he muttered, shrugging as he tried to slip his hands into the pockets of his coat, forgetting he was temporarily a pirate. “Go get cheeseburgers.”

“Like a daaaaate?” Irene taunted, elbow flapping repeatedly against his arm.

“Will you stop?” Sherlock blustered, feeling his cheeks heating yet again, and Irene cackled at his discomfort.

“THAT’S COAT-GUY!?”

Sherlock turned, Irene’s head snapping up right beside him to meet Harry Watson’s gaping expression where it peered at them over John’s shoulder.

John flinched, his shoulders hunching, and then, slowly, he turned, a sheepish grimace of embarrassment twisting at his features as he met Sherlock’s eyes. He shrugged helplessly, his face tinting pink, and, hours later, Sherlock was still giggling about it over their third order of chips.

Chapter End Notes
Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
“Sherlock?” John called, turning his head back toward the door as he rummaged through his wardrobe. “Sherlock!?” he shouted again, and there was a heavy sigh from downstairs before footsteps thumped up toward his door.

“What?” Sherlock snapped, standing in the doorway, tall and glowering.

“Have you seen my navy jumper?” he asked, closing the drawer he was currently looking through and opening the one beneath it. “Or the grey one? Or the- Actually, have you seen any of my jumpers?”

Sherlock snorted. “No. Perhaps they migrated back to whatever charity shop back-bin you dragged them out of.”

“Ha ha,” John deadpanned, sneering over his shoulder at the detective. “I can’t find them. I only have, like…three left.”

“Which ones?” Sherlock asked, and John’s fingers paused on the shirt he was lifting, his brow furrowing down at the fabric in confusion.

“Why?” he asked, turning back to the man.

A muscle twitched in Sherlock’s jaw, and then he rolled his eyes. “So I know which ones I’m looking for, obviously,” he muttered tiredly, but John only smiled at the gruff display, too accustomed to it by now to be affected.

“I still have the striped one, the light blue one, and that green one Mrs. Hudson got me,” he replied, and Sherlock nodded thoughtfully down at the floorboards. “I haven’t seen the others for a while, not since that conference in September.”

“Maybe you left them in Munich,” Sherlock offered, but John shook his head.

“No, I didn’t bring them. Wait,” he added, turning to the detective, “how did you know it was Munich? When I got back, you said you hadn’t even noticed I was gone.”

Sherlock’s throat bobbed as he shrugged. “Must have sunk in at some point. Come on,” he clipped, tipping his head back toward the stairs as he turned. “Lestrade called. Murder in Shoreditch.”

“Coming,” John replied, roughly stuffing his clothing back inside the drawer and slamming it shut before darting off after Sherlock down the stairs.
The murder, as it turned out, was a quick one, Sherlock deducing it was the boyfriend after John determined the young woman had been hit in the head—which somehow made sense in that tangle of a mind even messier than the man’s curls—which was how they found themselves at Angelo’s rather early in the evening, for once there when other patrons were still around.

Angelo, as always, put them near the front, beaming warmly down between them as he gave John the only menu he had bothered to bring over. “I’ll give you two a minute,” he said, speaking to John as Sherlock looked distractedly out the window. “Fetch a lighter for that candle.”

“Cheers,” John said, the counterarguments having long run dry, falling on deaf ears and skeptical winks as they did. He lifted his menu in front of him, searching over the entrees he didn’t really need to look at anymore, and then paused, a familiar prickling sensation buzzing at his neck. “What?” he asked before he’d even entirely looked up to meet Sherlock’s staring eyes.

The detective blinked, the searching expression flickering away to a pale, impassive mask. “Nothing,” he muttered, looking back out the window once more, his cheekbones casting sharp shadows down his face as his eyes reflected the streetlamps outside. “Order the lasagna.”

“What?” John chuckled, caught off-guard.

“You always order the lasagna when we come here immediately following a case,” Sherlock answered, and John blinked at him, lowering the menu to the table.

“No, I don’t,” he retorted, shaking his head, and Sherlock turned to him, quirking an eyebrow. John’s face fell as he thought, his forehead creasing down at the plastic-sheathed menu as he mentally recounted their past several cases.

Sherlock chuckled smugly, and John glared across at him as Angelo reappeared.

“Decided?” the smiling man said, hands folding behind his back as he looked down at John. “The lasagna, is it?”

Sherlock snorted, and John’s lips fell apart as he blinked dumbly up at Angelo.

“Yeah,” he muttered bitterly, passing his menu up as Sherlock laughed, “the lasagna.”

Angelo smiled, bowing his head to them as he left, and John looked pointedly at the condensation trailing down his glass, anything to keep from meeting Sherlock’s triumphant grin.

Eventually, Sherlock’s fuzzy head in the periphery of his vision turned away to the window again, and John chanced a glance up at him out of the tops of his eyes.

It was funny, really, how some things stayed the same even as everything changed around them. Sherlock, sitting as he had that first night, showed no sign of the past seven years, his face bereft of the growing lines and creases John was all-too-conscious of across his own skin, and, if he didn’t think too carefully, John could almost imagine it was that night, them both unmarred by the time that had passed. They’d been good times though, the kind of thing that was alright not forgetting, and, okay, so Sherlock had spent two years of it playing dead, but what was a little fake funeral between friends? And, anyway, John had forgiven him after a few weeks of I’m-only-here-because-of-the-case glares they both pretended were sincere. Of course, the real catalyst had been when Mary had sat down next to John on the bed—the one they shared in the once-hers, now-supposed-to-be-theirs flat—and taken his hand.

“You’re not really here anymore, are you?” she had asked without asking, smiling gently, and John’s things were in boxes on the pavement outside of 221B before sunset of the following day, Sherlock
grumbling as if terribly put out by the necessity of minimal manual labor.

He never asked why John came back, and John wasn’t going to provide an answer unsolicited, and, over time, the question sort of got lost, answering itself in the daily bickering over how expired the milk really was and who had to walk downstairs to fetch the paper.

Life had returned pretty much to normal after that, or as normal as it was ever going to be—which was apparently discussing the implications of different types of maggots on a corpse before going to get lasagna—and John wouldn’t have traded it for anything.

“So, what are you gonna do with the weekend to yourself?” he asked as Angelo brought his lasagna, reaching across to light the candle with a wink John returned with a smile.

“What? Weekend?” Sherlock muttered, eyebrows falling as he snapped his face to John’s.

“Yeah, the housewarming, remember? Up at Harry and Clara’s?” John reminded, pausing to chew the heavenly blend of meat and cheese he honestly didn’t care was his always-order. “They bought that new place in the suburbs after they reconciled; wanna throw a party to break it in.”

Sherlock only blinked at him, the remainder of his body frozen.

“I told you about this weeks ago,” John sighed, absolutely certain of at least that much. “I said I was going up to their place for the weekend to check it out, and you said-”

“Don’t bring wine,” Sherlock concluded, nodding with memory.

John smiled, hardly offended in the first place, let alone in the retelling, but the reminder settled something cold and heavy in his gut, and he clicked his fork nervously against the edge of the plate. “She’s been going to AA,” he mumbled down at his lasagna, flicking a glance up at the detective, who was watching him closely, face carefully controlled. “Says she’s been sober ten months.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed fractionally, a quick survey across John’s own. “Are you-” he began questioningly, but John cut him off.

“Yes,” he answered, voice steady and firm, but Sherlock seemed to double-check anyway, scanning over his face once more before he spoke.

“I think it’s closer to nine,” he said, voice growing softer in the space between them, “but she has been sober. Although, I believe it has been something of a struggle.”

John nodded, relief flooding warm through his stomach. “Right,” he clipped, nodding as he regained his appetite, stabbing a bite of lasagna, “well, that makes sense, I guess. With addiction.”

Sherlock hummed thoughtfully, and John didn’t realize he’d put his foot in his mouth along with the pasta until a few beats of silence later.

“Sorry, I-I didn’t-” he stammered, and Sherlock lifted a hand a few inches off the table, batting his contrition away.

“I know,” he assured, almost impatient, and John smiled tentatively.

Then, as long as they were almost talking about it, he lowered his fork. “I never did- I mean, after-” He faltered, not entirely sure how to broach the subject of Sherlock’s relapse, as previously untouched as it was. “Do you- Do you…struggle?” he opted, swallowing around his embarrassment. He was a doctor, for chrissake, he could talk about this!
Sherlock smiled, a shy thing that settled strangely on his face, as if his features were uncomfortable holding it there. “Not particularly. As of late.”

John’s ears temporarily malfunctioned, a sort of hollow whoosh wiping sound from the room for a moment. “Oh,” he murmured, fidgeting his fork in a twirl, “good.”

Sherlock smiled again, much smugger now, and that one came easily as he gave John a small nod before returning to his vigil at the darkening streets, a crisp autumn wind whipping color off the handful of trees planted incrementally along the pavement.

“So, what are you gonna do?” John pressed after several minutes and half his lasagna.

Sherlock shrugged, turning his head but not his eyes. “I don’t know. Likely nothing of import.”

A smirk tugged at John’s mouth, a primary-school mimic of ‘nothing of import’ threatening to break free. “You could come with me,” he offered instead, and Sherlock blinked out at the glass, eyes growing unfocused. “To Harry’s,” John added when the brunette remained mute. “I mean, I know the last time didn’t go so well—”

“I’m not sure if ‘stitches were required’ and ‘not so well’ are entirely the same thing,” Sherlock interjected, tipping an eyebrow at John across the table.

“I still don’t think she meant to hit you with the plate,” John countered, and Sherlock chuckled, folding his elbows on the table in front of him.

“All the same,” he replied with an airy flick of his hand, “I think some distance would probably be best.”

“Yeah,” John muttered, nodding dully as he looked back down to his plate, but something oddly akin to disappointment curdled in his throat. “Yeah, probably.”

They didn’t talk about it again until John was leaving for the clinic Friday morning, Sherlock lying prostrate on the living room couch, half his pajamas exposed as his dressing gown pooled over the side toward the floor.

“I’m heading out,” John said simply, bobbing a thumb behind him to the stairs.

“Mmm,” Sherlock hummed, eyes closed, fingers steepled beneath his chin.

John shifted his weight, tugging at the strap of his bag where it dug into his shoulder. “So, I’ll, er, see you Sunday then. Probably be quite late.”

Sherlock’s head wobbled in a vague nod, and John glared down at the offending mop of dark curls. “Right,” he snapped, turning sharply on the floorboards. “Goodbye.” He thumped down the stairs, slamming the door perhaps a bit harder than necessary before grumbling to himself all the way to the tube station.

Hours later, halfway through his third explanation of where babies come from and cursing the sex education system, he realized he’d forgotten his housewarming present—a potted plant he had left by the door in his commitment to his grand storming-out—and, the second he was off rotation, he was bustling back to Baker Street, checking his watch all the while. He had time before his train left, but only just enough, so it was with an irritable growl of frustration that he opened the door to find the plant missing, only flecks of dark dirt left to signify its existence at all.
“Sherlock?” he called out, dropping his bag to the floor as he vaulted up the stairs. “I swear, if you’ve set it on fire-”

There was a loud thump from inside the flat, following by a scrabbling, and John, certain he was about to walk in on his gift being thoroughly massacred, rushed through the door. Just as quickly, he stillled, hand freezing on the doorknob as he looked over the scene, which included a rather wide-eyed detective staring at him from across the room, arms crossed defensively over his chest.

“Sherlock?” he asked, tilting his head as he stepped in. “What are you- Is that-”

“No,” Sherlock muttered, but John had seen it clearly, his forest green jumper stretched too-tight and too-short across the brunette’s thin frame.

“Why are you wearing my jumper?” he asked, pointing at the fabric as he approached, and Sherlock shifted away, moving along the wall toward the fireplace.

“I was cold,” he snipped, skittering past John as he made toward the kitchen.

“Oh,” John mumbled, letting his hand drop as he turned around, standing in the doorway to watch Sherlock’s back hunch over the electric kettle. “Well, you could’ve taken one of the clean ones,” he offered, lifting his arm vaguely in the direction of the stairs to his room. “I mean, I only have, like, two left, but that one I wore yesterday. And I think there’s ketchup on it.”

“There is,” Sherlock muttered, mugs clinking loudly as he seemingly only shifted them in the cupboard, his hands empty when they withdrew.

“Well then why are you wearing it?” John chuckled, but his amusement slowly dripped from his face as Sherlock stilled, almost seeming to grow smaller in front of his eyes. “Sherlock?” he pried, taking a slow step around the kitchen table.

The man did not reply, and, as John angled his head, he could see a sliver of the detective’s, his grey eyes darting anxiously side-to-side across the counter.

“Sherlock, what? What are you doing? Are you…experimenting in it or something?” he guessed, glancing around, but the kitchen appeared bereft of anything smoking or rotting. “Is that what happened to all my other ones? Because I know you didn’t like them, but, really, I think acid burns might be taking it a little far.”

“I didn’t burn your jumpers,” Sherlock sighed, rolling the slice of his eyes John could see.

“But you did take them,” John deduced, piecing together the syntax, and Sherlock bit at his lip. “All of them?” he urged, and Sherlock, mutely and without meeting his eyes, nodded. “Why?” he asked, head shaking in bemusement.

Sherlock sighed, turning to lean the small of his back against the kitchen counter, his arms folding across his chest as he stretched the sleeves of John’s jumper down to cover his hands, pulling the neckline off his collarbones. “I-I don’t like…being alone.”

John blinked, perplexed. “Okay…” he drawled, and Sherlock dropped his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose.

“I mean, I-I don’t- When you’re not here, I-” He snarled in frustration, lifting his face to the ceiling, and then closed his eyes, dropping back down once more. “Nothing. Forget it,” he muttered, shaking his head as he spun back toward the kettle. “I’ll have Mrs. Hudson wash them, and then I’ll put them back. You’re going to miss your train.”
“There’s another one,” John stated, moving closer along the counter’s edge. “Now, come on, what do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock repeated, the back of his head shaking, and John folded his arms defiantly even though the man couldn’t see him.

“Sherlock,” he said flatly, and the brunette’s shoulders twitched.

“I said it’s nothing,” he repeated, and John scoffed.

“Yeah, well, clearly-”

“Will you just leave it alone!?” Sherlock interjected, rounding on him, his eyes wild and…pained?

John shook his head. “No,” he replied, going for gentle and ending up somewhere closer to stern.

Sherlock growled, expression twisting in exasperation. “Why not?!?” he whined, the tension in the room rapidly rising along with the volume.

“Because I want to know!”

“Why!?”

“Sherlock!”

“Dammit, John, because!”

“Because why?”

“BECAUSE!”

“BECAUSE WHY!?”

“BECAUSE THEY SMELL LIKE YOU!”

John’s angrily creased brow instantly unfolded, his body recoiling a half-step in shock, but Sherlock didn’t stop, the words tumbling out of him like the breaching of a dam.

“Because it’s awful, awful being here without you! And, sometimes, I forget you’re coming back—sometimes I think you won’t come back, that you’ll find another girlfriend with another flat that you’ll move into and play happily-ever-after, and I’ll just-just-” He faltered, his face nothing short of crumpling as his body slumped back against the counter. “I’ll be alone again,” he choked, eyes falling to his slippers where they shuffled against the linoleum, his fingers twisting in the sleeves of John’s jumper.

For a long moment, John could do nothing but stare, stare and wonder and see for quite possibly the first time, and, as sudden as they were a long time coming, the words flowed out.

“I took your duvet,” he said, eyes never wavering from Sherlock’s, which turned hesitantly toward him, brow creased with confusion.

“What?” he breathed, rattling his head.

John shuffled closer, his head bowed to Sherlock’s chest, the prospect of looking in his eyes when he admitted this just a little too much to bear. “When you were…gone,” he muttered, their long-standing euphemism for the two years they both mostly pretended never happened. “I took your duvet. And
“I’m sorry,” Sherlock whispered, and it wasn’t the first time, wasn’t even the fifth or the tenth or the twentieth, but John’s eyes clenched shut regardless, biting off the tide of emotion that threatened to drag him out to sea.

“I know,” he said, voice only slightly strangled. “I know.” With a mind entirely its own, his hand lifted, but John didn’t argue as it brushed lightly against Sherlock’s, catching a pale index fingers between two of his darker digits in a weak but undeniable hold. He could feel Sherlock staring down at it, see the confusion in the small twitches of his hand, and then, he shifted, sliding his fingers just fractionally tighter in the gaps between John’s.

The longest minute that had ever passed since the world first started spinning ticked by around them, and then, apparently no part of his body under his power anymore, John heard himself speak.

“Come with me,” he breathed, his heart leaping in momentary terror, but it quickly calmed, a certain stillness of surety settling over him. “To Harry’s,” he clarified, even managing to smile as he looked up. “Come with me.”

Sherlock blinked, mouth fluttering soundlessly for a moment before he managed to string together syllables. “But- She- The plate-”

“I promise I’ll be there to stitch you up,” John assured, smile brightening as he tightened his grip on Sherlock’s hand, leaving no question now.

The man chuckled, looking down, his arm swaying lightly as he swung their combined hold. “Well…alright,” he relented, smile soft as he looked through his lashes.

John beamed. “Good,” he chirped, bobbing their hands before pulling back, his fingers dragging across Sherlock’s palm as they retreated. “Or we really are gonna miss the train.” He looked down at his watch as Sherlock laughed, moving away toward the corridor.

“Oh, um, John?” he muttered, turning in the doorway, the corner of his lip caught between his teeth as he avoided direct eye contact. “About the plant…”

John sighed, shaking his head, but his mouth was smiling fondly. “Go on,” he urged, batting a hand. “We’ll stop at a florist on the way.”

Sherlock grinned, and then flounced away, returning a few minutes later with a bag, and, more notably, a veritable tower of John’s jumpers. He smiled sheepishly over them as he rested them on the kitchen table, straightening the top one with a small tug. “I-I figured I wouldn’t need them…anymore.”

John looked down at the pile of his clothing, a slow smile blooming on his face. “No,” he confirmed, brushing a hand over the black cotton of the topmost garment. “No, you won’t.”

Sherlock—both miraculously and torturously—blushed. “Although,” he clipped, turning away and heading toward the stairs, “I do think you were onto something with the acid burns. With that purple
one especially.”

“What’s wrong with the purple one?” John blustered, following after him.

“Come along, John!” Sherlock called back over his shoulder as he skipped down the steps. “Wouldn’t want to be late!” He swept out the door, leaving it open behind him, and John stood still at the top of the stairs, staring dumbly after him.

“Bastard,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head as he thumped down to the foyer. “Mad bloody bastard,” he snarled, but he was smiling as he plucked his bag up onto his shoulder, stepping out into the cold and after Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to keep sending me your prompts!
Chapter Summary

_Prompt_: Kidlock, where Sherlock is secretly a big baby about scary movies and John stays the night to protect him from the monsters. (Then if you have time, a teenlock follow up where John takes Sherlock to a scary movie on a date) - anonymous

I made time! I was really excited about this prompt, and I know a lot of you were too, so I hope you like what I did with it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“John?”

...

“John?”

...

“Joooooh-”

“What, Sherlock!?”

“There’s something outside.”

John sighed, the air mattress squeaking and scraping beneath him as he rolled over to find Sherlock peering down at him over the side of his bed. “What?” he asked tiredly, rubbing at his eyes.

“There’s something outside,” Sherlock repeated in earnest, the orbs of his eyes shining frantic in the gloom as he turned his head back to the window behind him. “In the tree.”

John sat up, craning his neck to see over Sherlock’s body, looking across his bed to the window beyond. “It’s just the branches, Sherlock,” he muttered, shaking his head as he fell back to his makeshift bed on the floor. “They brush against your window all the time, you know that.”

“No, I saw something!”

John closed his eyes, grip tightening on the edge of his duvet for a moment before he calmly rolled back over. “What did you see?” he asked, voice pulled taut with impatience.

Sherlock blinked, his face falling to the mattress as he fidgeted his fingers in the sheets. “I- A cape,” he murmured, looking across through his lashes.

“A cape,” John repeated flatly, and then groaned, grinding his palms into his eyes as he sprawled out on his back. “Sherlock, I told you we didn’t have to watch the movie!”

“It’s not because of the movie!”
“Oh, really?” John scoffed, turning his head toward the shaggy-haired silhouette. “So, the fact that you’re imagining vampires climbing trees has nothing to do with us watching Dracula?”

“I’m not imagining it!” Sherlock asserted, brow creasing in a scowl. “I saw something!”

“Was it in black and white?”

“John!”

“Alright, alright,” John grumbled, propping up on his elbows as he pushed his head up level with the younger boy’s. “What do you want me to do? Go check?”

“No!” Sherlock bleated, eyes wide as his hand darted out in halting. “No, he could get you!”

“Oh my god,” John muttered, shaking his head as he momentarily dropped it to his chest. “Sherlock, it’s not real, okay?” he said gently, affecting the tone his mother had always used with him before he turned ten and grew out of such ridiculous notions. “It’s just a movie. A really, really old movie.”

“I know that, John,” Sherlock snapped, because, obviously, John was the one being absurd. “I’m nine years old; I’m not stupid.”

“No, of course not,” John grumbled. “Who said anything about you being stupid? You just think there’s a Transylvanian in a bowtie outside your window.”

Sherlock glared at him, the heat of it prickling at the back of John’s neck even though he could barely see the boy’s face.

He sighed, exhaustion overtaking his annoyance. “Okay, what do you wanna do?” he asked, leaning forward as he loosely wrapped his arms around his drawn-up knees. “I could go get Mycroft. He could check. You probably wouldn’t mind if he got bit, would you?”

Sherlock scoffed. “No, but he’d make fun of me,” he replied, sounding so self-conscious, John didn’t have the heart to take the golden opportunity.

“Well, what then? You wanna go somewhere else? We could sleep in the library or something. Or we could switch, and I could sleep up there by the window.”

“Can we?” Sherlock blurted, and then recoiled a few inches back across the mattress, ducking his head. “I mean, if—if you don’t—”

“Hey, I suggested it,” John interrupted, shrugging as he battted the blankets down to his ankles, standing on wobbly legs as he maneuvered his way off the air mattress, “and I’m not gonna argue with getting the real bed. But, fair warning, move on that thing at all, and it sounds like a bomb going off in your ear.”

Sherlock chuckled, his thin legs folding over the side of his bed before he stood, lowering himself delicately onto the air mattress, his body wobbling precariously as he crawled to the center on all fours.

John smiled down at him, shaking his head, and then walked to the opposite side of the bed, closest to the window and unheated by Sherlock’s body. He shuffled in under the blankets, wriggling a spot for himself in the pillow before closing his eyes, the light of the moon flickering across his face as branches passed between them, blocking the light where they blew in the breeze. He was almost back to sleep when he heard the telltale squeak of the air mattress, and was immediately rolling over with a blustering groan.
“What now?” he nearly whined as Sherlock’s head popped up into his vision. “You want a stake? Because I will break off a leg of your chair and sharpen it for you at this point, I really will.”

“I’m by the door,” Sherlock replied, blinking sheepishly down at the edge of the bed.

“Well, I’m sorry, Sherlock, but unless you wanna sleep in the closet, you’re going to have to be next to something.”

“Can I sleep with you?”

John blinked, the scratching of the branches on the window the only sound in the moonlit room. “You- You’d still be by the door,” he said, the only coherent thought coming to him right now.

Sherlock smiled, shrugging a shoulder. “Yeah, but I’d be with you.”

John’s lips popped apart, his chest unbearably tight for a moment as his lungs seemed to swell. “I- Yeah, alright,” he replied, shuffling a bit further toward the edge as Sherlock noisily clamored up onto the bed beside him, the mattress dipping with his added weight.

He settled down against the pillow, his curls matting flat on one side, and tugged the duvet up in a fist beneath his chin, his mouth partially obscured by the fabric. Echoes of branches moved through the light on his pale face, casting darkness over one of his eyes as they blinked across at John. “Night,” he said, smiling gently, and then tucked his face further down into the blankets, burrowing in for sleep.

“Yeah,” John whispered, watching the boy’s still face for a moment before rolling back to the window, suddenly wide awake, “night.”

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“Oh my god, there are colors out here!” John stretched his hands out to the street, mouth open wide with faux awe as he blinked owlishly. “And look! A compressed long-distance-communication device! WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE!”

“Stop it,” Sherlock snipped, though he was smiling as he looked down at his mobile, which John was animatedly gesticulating toward. “You sound deranged.”

“I am deranged,” John countered, nodding pointedly as they headed down the pavement toward the fish and chip place that was more of a habit than a decision at this point. “We just sat through five hours of black and white movies. I feel like I’m in Pleasantville. Or…the reverse of Pleasantville?”

He frowned, rattling his head to dismiss the question. “Whose idea was that, anyway?”

“Most assuredly not mine,” Sherlock answered with a sniff as he swiped across the screen of his mobile. “A five-hour classic horror movie marathon is hardly my idea of a Saturday well-spent.”

“Oh, come on, you had fun,” John goaded, elbowing the man lightly on the arm. “You ate our weight in popcorn.”

“Yes, well, it was the only draw.” Sherlock gave him a sidelong smile, the angles of his face illuminated in the pale blue light of his phone, and then his eyes fell back to the screen.

“Lestrade?” John asked, attempting to read the text and not run into postboxes at the same time. Sherlock nodded. “Says he has something he wants me to take a look at. Possible poisoning.”
“Now, that’s a Saturday well-spent,” John grinned, and Sherlock laughed. “This is, what? The third case now?”

“Mhmm,” Sherlock hummed, but the proud smile tugging at his mouth said much more.

John let out a low whistle. “Looks like you’re gonna be a proper detective soon. Battling the forces of evil. Saving damsels in distress.”

“I think those horror movies addled your brain,” Sherlock chuckled, pocketing his phone, his hands remaining inside the compartments of his coat. “No, he just wants me to look. I don’t think the Yard would take too kindly to a seventeen-year-old on the payroll.”

“Their loss,” John asserted, looking side-to-side before starting off across the street. “So did he say anything specific about the poisoning?”

“Not particularly.” Sherlock looked down at him, head tilting slightly. “Why?”

John shrugged, thumbs hooking into his belt loops. “No reason. I was just curious. You—you don’t really talk about it all that much. What you do with them.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “I presumed grisly murders were not something you would be interested in discussing.”

“Well- Okay, no,” John muttered, feeling rather caught. “That makes me sound like a crazy person. I just- I dunno.” He shrugged, his eyes darting aimlessly around the street ahead. “It’s something you do, something you’re interested in, and I- Well, I’m interested in you. The things you do, I mean, I-I’m interested in the things you do.” He bit his lip, flinching fractionally as Sherlock laughed.

“Well, alright,” he replied easily. “I suppose if you want to know.”

“I do,” John assured, smiling up at him. “I wanna know.”

“There’s not much to tell yet.”

They stopped at another intersection, turning toward one another on the corner as they waited for the light to change.

“Lestrade just said he had a case for me to look at. He’s gonna drop it off tomorrow.”

John nodded, moving his hands to his pockets as he watched the light shift to yellow.

“Um, I—”

John turned to the brunette, looking up expectantly as Sherlock looked just past him.

“I’m-I’m interested in things you do too, you know,” he murmured, shrugging in a twitch. “I mean, you-you can tell me about…rugby or-or whatever.”

John smiled, facing back to the street as they started to walk. “You just sat through a scary movie marathon because I picked it out of the paper. I think you’ve suffered enough for one night.”

Sherlock laughed. “It wasn’t that bad,” he admitted, kicking at a loose stone on the pavement.

“No, I was expecting a lot worse,” John chuckled, tipping his head, and then blinked, his throat tightening as he realized what he’d started.
“What do you mean?” Sherlock predictably asked.

“Nothing,” John attempted to dismiss, waving a hand, but he could feel his smile was straining at the edges. “It’s just those movies used to scare you. The restaurant’s open til 2 on Saturdays, isn’t it?”

“Scare me?” Sherlock repeated, of course the only part he picked up on. “Why would you take me expecting me to be scared?”

“Because it’s Halloween. Tis the season. You know, we can just go home; we don’t have to get food.”

“Why are you doing that?” Sherlock stopped, laying a hand on John’s arm to turn him, his eyes unfairly focused as they narrowed down on John’s face. “Why are you trying to change the subject?”

“Because there’s nothing to say,” John insisted, rattling his arm free. “I thought you’d be scared; you weren’t. Not exactly newsworthy.”

“Yes, but why does it bother you?” Sherlock pressed, tilting his head as he frowned. “Why do you care that I wasn’t scared?”

“I don’t, okay?”

Sherlock’s eyes widened, his mouth parting in affront at John’s tone, and John took a breath, settling his voice back to calm.

“I don’t care that you weren’t scared,” he tried again, slow and deliberate. “Be scared, don’t be scared, it doesn’t make any difference to me. Now, can we just-”

“Why are you lying to me?”

John’s eyes closed at the ground, his hands clenching to fists in his pockets.

“You never lie to me,” Sherlock continued, and, when John looked up, it was to meet uncharacteristic confusion in pained grey eyes.

“I-I’m not, I just-”

“John!”

“Okay!” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as he dropped his face to the ground. “Okay, I- It’s just- I didn’t want you to be scared, okay? I mean, that wasn’t the point.”

Sherlock nodded as if that had been obvious, although, to him, perhaps it was.

John, however, had much less firm a grasp on his reasoning. “I just- Okay, you know how people go to scary movies? Like…with other people?” He lifted his eyebrows, attempting to imply, but Sherlock didn’t appear capable of inferring.

“Well, why would someone go to a scary movie alone? Or any movie, for that matter?” he muttered, rattling his head and smiling vaguely at the general stupidity of the human race.

“No, I mean- Ugh!” He huffed a breath out at the pavement, stiffening his shoulders as he gathered his resolve. “Do you know why people go to scary movies? With one another. Just two people. Together.”

Sherlock blinked at him, head tilting downright comically, and John threw delicacy to the wind, his
grave already dug plenty deep enough anyway.

“Sherlock, what did I say when I first mentioned the movie marathon to you?”

“You said that the old theater on Robbins was running a marathon of horror movies for Hallo-”

“No, I mean after that. What did I say after you said you’d come?”

“You said ‘It’s a date’.”

John threw his hands out wide, gesturing to the grand climax of the most awkward conversation of his life.

Sherlock frowned, somehow still confused, and then his eyes bulged, lips dropping apart. “You-You mean- But you say that all the time!”

John laughed, the options being that or cry. “Yeah, I do,” he chuckled miserably. “I do.”

Sherlock blinked down at the ground, eyes scanning side-to-side as he no doubt searched through the vaults of his mind palace for every moment John had tried to forget. “So, you mean- All this time, you-”

John swallowed hard, but nodded, his weight shifting between his feet as he looked down the out-of-focus street.

Sherlock was silent beside him for a moment, always a bad sign, and then, naturally, he started gathering data. “The James Bond marathon at your house?”

John nodded.

“The James Bond marathon at your house?”

John nodded.

“Your rugby games?”

He nodded again.

“That carnival last summer?”

“Yes, alright, yes!” John railed, startling a young girl walking along the pavement on the opposite side of the street, and he flashed a small wave of apology to her as she glared. “Everything you’re going to say, probably yes. But, honestly, how you didn’t figure it out at the carnival, I will never—”

“Why did I have to figure it out at all?!” Sherlock rounded on him, anger flashing in his eyes. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Because how do you say something like that, Sherlock?” John snapped back, but his voice cracked a bit around the edges. “It’s not like you can just slip it into conversation. ‘Hey, did you get the maths homework done? Oh, and, by the way, I’ve been in love with you since we were ten. So, what did you get for number seven?’” He glared up at the man, a frustrated sort of fury growing in his chest, and he was expecting an angry retort, perhaps a biting sarcastic comment, but what he most certainly would never have considered a possibility was that Sherlock would laugh.

It wasn’t a normal laugh either, not his brief chuckle or lip-biting grin, not even on par with the few times John had made him snort. It was the kind of laugh that requires you to stop, unable to focus on controlling any part of your body other than your legs enough to keep you standing, and Sherlock staggered over to a nearby lamppost, bracing his back against the painted metal.

“Right then,” John clipped, fists clenching at his sides as he watched tears leaking out the corners of
Sherlock’s eyes, “I’ll just go.”

“No, J- John!” Sherlock gasped, stumbling after him as John barreled away.

“Glad you got a good laugh out of it, though. That’s comforting.”

“John, wait!”

“Why!?” John spun, Sherlock nearly running into him as he stopped dead outside a small pizza restaurant, the neon ‘Open’ sign flashing rhythmic red across their faces. “So you can laugh some more? Because, I gotta say, I’d really rather not stick around for that.”

“Do you remember how we met?”

John blinked, the tension in his muscles falling slack with surprise. “I- What?”

Sherlock sighed, looking aside a moment before shuffling a small step closer. “Do you remember how we met?” he repeated, a strange sort of earnest in his eyes, and John was temporarily frozen, transfixed under the grey gaze.

“I- Yes,” he muttered, blinking back into awareness. “You were getting beat up on the playground.”

“I was not getting beat up,” Sherlock countered stiffly, and John scoffed.

“You were getting your six-year-old ass handed to you,” he said smugly, and Sherlock’s glare sharpened briefly before relenting.

“Fine,” he clipped, waving a hand, “but do you remember what happened?”

“I had to save your six-year-old ass.”

“I was not-”

“Sherlock.” John dipped his head, giving the snarling man a patient look.

The brunette huffed irritably through his nose, eyebrows lowering over narrowed eyes, and then he turned his head, the tension blinking from his face. “No one- No one had ever done anything like that for me before.”

“What, prevented your murder?”

“No,” Sherlock replied softly, shaking his head. “Cared.”

John’s breath hitched in a small startled gasp, his lack of oxygen only made worse when Sherlock looked up at him, expression open and anxious.

“I-I know I’m bad at this,” he murmured, bowing his head to the ground. “I never- I don’t love well.” He looked up, shrugging helplessly, and John was somehow simultaneously flying into the sky and pooling down to the ground. “I don’t know what to say or what to do. I don’t know what holidays are most important, or what dates I can’t forget. I don’t know if I have to know your favorite color, or if just your favorite ice cream flavor is enough. Although, actually, that’s a bad example, because I know both of those—red and mint chocolate chip—but the point is-”

“You love me.”

Sherlock’s mouth froze mid-word, his hands stalling where they were batting through the air, and
then, slowly, he nodded. “I do,” he breathed, body seeming to actually wilt in relief at the admission. “God help me, I do.”

John stared up at him, confident that, if he were to startle awake in his bed the very next second, he would have no trouble believing this had been a dream. And yet, the scene remained, Sherlock standing there looking like the wrong word might just kill him, and John opened his mouth, no idea yet what was about to come out.

Suddenly, he was granted a reprieve, the door of the fish and chip restaurant a few meters behind him opening to release a large group of people, all shouting and laughing loudly into the dark, and both he and Sherlock turned, startled by the intrusion. The distraction brought with it a moment of clarity, however, and he twisted back to the brunette, renewed confidence flushing through his veins and pulling at his mouth.

“Whadya say?” he asked, jerking his head back toward the restaurant, and the detective blinked at him, head tilting perplexedly. John smiled, shrugging as he pushed his hands down into his pockets. “Dates usually end with dinner.”

Sherlock remained frozen a second longer, and then his face split into the kind of smile John had previously thought only existed in toothpaste adverts. “So…it’s a date?” he asked, and John bit his lip to keep from grinning.

“Yeah,” he answered, nodding, “it’s a date.” He caught the brightening of Sherlock’s eyes before he turned, striding toward the restaurant door. “But you’re buying,” he added over his shoulder, and Sherlock’s laughter washed warmly over him as the man drew up to his side.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
Chapter Summary

*Prompt:* Kidlock trick-or-treating - foret-vierge

*Prompt:* Maybe some festive trick-or-treating with little Sherlock and John? Thank you, and I adore your work. Cheers! - Ragnarokker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I look like an idiot.”

“Where did you learn that word?”

“Mycroft.”

“Well, don’t say that. And you don’t look like one of those; you look sweet.”

“I didn’t want to look sweet!”

“Sherlock, stop, you’ll tear your wing.”

Sherlock huffed, his small fingers falling away from the mesh-draped wire wings flapping at his back. “Why do I even need wings?” he whined, shuffling his black shoes along the pavement. “And why do they have to stick out so much? They could’ve been flat, like when the bees aren’t flying.”

“Because those aren’t the ones that came with the costume,” his mother patiently replied, smiling down at him, but Sherlock only glared.

“But the costume is stupid!” he spat, and his mother stopped, moving in front of him as she bent down with a stern expression.

“Sherlock Holmes,” she said, finger flapping in his face like it always did when he was about to miss out on dessert, “do not speak to me like that. I went to the store, I bought you the costume you wanted, and now I am out here on the coldest Halloween we’ve had in years because you wanted to try trick-or-treating. I will not tolerate that kind of language, and, if you speak to me that way again, we will go straight home, and you will not see a single piece of those sweets. Do you understand?”

Mutely, and thoroughly ashamed, Sherlock nodded, clutching tightly to the handles of his cloth sack as he held it in front of his chest.

His mother withdrew her hand, smiling softly. “Your wings look fine,” she assured, tracing a gentle hand over his hair. “It was that headband that looked ridiculous. Who ever heard of bee antennae being curly?”

Sherlock was startled into a laugh, and his mother smiled, straightening up as she urged him forward with a soft press at his shoulder.
“Come on, this street is supposed to have the best decorations in the city. I heard they actually give out an *award* to the best one.” She raised her eyebrows down at him, dipping her head pointedly, and Sherlock grinned, giddy with renewed excitement.

“Is it gonna be scary?” he chirped, bobbing along beside her, sweets rattling in his bag with every bouncing step. “Are there gonna be skeletons? Zombies? Blood?”

“Probably,” his mother answered, shrugging. “I bet there will be *buckets* of blood!” she added, scary-movie-voice making its third appearance of the evening, and she bent down to him with wide-stretched eyes, tickling at his sides.

“Mum, stop!” he giggled, batting her away, his cheeks blushing red in embarrassment. He tugged at his costume, smoothing it where her hands had pinched and creased the fabric. “The human body can’t even *hold* buckets of blood; it’s only about 5 and a half liters,” he added primly, and his mother looked down at him, eyebrows rising.

“I knew that Discovery Channel was a bad idea,” she muttered, and Sherlock frowned, tilting his head up at her, but was prevented from asking what exactly she meant by a shout from in front of them.

“Violet?”

Sherlock turned, blinking in the relative dim to see a woman walking toward them, a bright smile appearing on her cold-flushed face as she brushed blonde hair back with thick fingers.

“Liz!” his mother replied, the clicks of her heels quickening as she strode to meet the woman, Sherlock shifting behind the shelter of her legs. “How are you?” his mother asked as they drew level, and the woman shrugged, smiling.

“Very good, very good. We’ve settled in quite nicely, thank you. You and the other parents in the group have been *such* a big help.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Sherlock’s mother answered, flicking a hand through the air. “It was the least we could do; you moving into the area so suddenly like that. Just a week before school started! I don’t know what possessed you to do it.”

The blonde woman—Liz, apparently—laughed, her teeth white behind red-tinted lips. “It took a bit longer to sell the house than I’d thought. And, of course, Jim was fighting me every step of the way.” Sherlock’s mother nodded sympathetically, and Sherlock frowned, the entire cast of characters in this story a mystery to him.

“Mum, mum!” Quick footsteps came flapping up behind the woman’s denim-clad legs, and then a small figure appeared, nearly invisible with his entirely black outfit in the dark. “That house has a *vampire*!”

“Oh, really!” Liz replied, bending down slightly to the boy, and Sherlock barely restrained a scoff at her obviously feigned interest. “Violet,” she continued, straightening up as she turned once again to Sherlock’s mother, one hand settling on the black-cloaked boy’s shoulder, “this is my son, John.”

The boy tilted his head up, shifting his trick-or-treat bag—a simple plastic sack from Sainsbury’s—between his hands to pull the black hood away from his face. “Hello,” he chirped, grin startlingly wide and bright beneath blue eyes and static-charged blond hair. He extended a hand toward Sherlock’s mother, fingers outstretched. “It’s nice to meet you.”
Sherlock blinked at him, startled at the formality—the boy could only be a few years older than him, at most—but his mother chuckled, bowing a little to reach the boy’s hand.

“Hello, John,” she smiled, shaking his small fingers in her own. “I’m Mrs. Holmes. And this is my son, Sherlock.”

Sherlock tried to move with her, ducking quickly toward her legs as they shifted aside, but he wasn’t quick enough, and found himself quite exposed as the boy’s eyes shifted to his.

John beamed, moving a small step closer. “Hi,” he said, thankfully not going in for a handshake, and instead waving his hand at his shoulder in greeting. “I’m John,” he added, and Sherlock wanted to say he already knew that, that John had literally just said that, but he only swallowed, ducking his chin.

“Sherlock,” his mother hissed down at him, and he shuffled his feet.

“Hello,” he managed to mumble in reply, glancing up at her for approval, and she nodded, his performance apparently satisfactory.

“Oh, so this is Sherlock!” Liz bent double, bowing much too far into his personal space as she grinned. “I was wondering when we’d have the chance to meet. My name’s Liz.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, more prepared to comment on everyone’s redundancy now, but his mother cleared her throat, ending the thought. “Nice to meet you,” he replied, mechanically proper as he bowed his head.

The woman smiled at him, mercifully lifting away to talk to his mother, and Sherlock thought he could sneak back to hiding behind her when John stepped forward.

“I like your costume,” he said, and Sherlock immediately plucked at it self-consciously.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, and John, inexplicably, smiled like that was the most brilliant reply he’d ever heard.

“I’m a ninja,” he said, nodding briskly as he scrabbled at his hood, pulling it once more over his face, only his blue eyes exposed within the black. “I wanted a sword, but mum said we didn’t have the money.”

“Oh,” Sherlock murmured, entirely out of his element. He couldn’t stop speaking, however, because he now had a question, something he was never fond of leaving without the matching answer. “What—What’s a…ninja?”

John, far from mocking him as Sherlock had expected, grinned as he pulled his hood away once again. “It’s like a soldier,” he explained, bag rustling in his hand as he moved, “but from Japan. They protect people. Important people, like kings and doctors and stuff.”

Sherlock nodded, returning to wanting to leave now that that was settled.

“Why did you dress up as a bee?”

Sherlock blinked, the question unexpected, not least of all because John actually looked genuinely interested in his answer, as opposed to the expressions of polite but forced intrigue Sherlock was more accustomed to.

“I mean, they’re not really scary,” John added, shrugging, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed.
“Neither are ninjas,” he snapped, immediately flashing a look to his mother, expecting a reprimand, but his attention was drawn away as John laughed.

“No, I guess not,” he admitted, tilting his head, and Sherlock simply gaped at him. “So, why then?” he repeated, eyes blinking expectantly. “Why did you dress up as a bee?”

“I- They’re a vital part of the ecosystem,” Sherlock blurted, the documentaries he had had Mycroft record bursting back into his mind, a fortunate occurrence, seeing as none of his own words appeared to be forthcoming. “Their population is declining, though. Some scientists fear they may eventually become extinct.”

“What’s that?” John questioned, brow furrowing. “Extinct?”

“It- It means-” Sherlock stammered, fingers fidgeting in the handles of his bag, “there might not be any more. There’s a lot less of them now, I guess, and people are worried they’ll all go away or die.”

“They could do that?” John breathed, appropriately horrified, his eyes wide with terror. “They could just…be gone? All of them? Forever?”

Sherlock nodded, peering hesitantly up through his lashes as he watched John frown at the ground, expecting the ‘freak’ or ‘loser’ to come at any moment.

Instead, John nodded, expression determined as he lifted his face to Sherlock. “Well then,” he said, pulling his hood back into place, “I guess I’ll have to stay with you.”


John moved closer, his added height becoming more obvious, and Sherlock had to lift his chin to keep focus on his eyes. “Because you need protection,” he replied simply, “and I’m a ninja. So I’ll protect you.”

Sherlock’s lips fell apart, his tongue unprecedentedly stalled, but John didn’t appear to need a reply, turning instead to where their mothers were talking animatedly above them.

“Mum?” he beckoned, and both women turned down to them. “I’m gonna go with Sherlock, okay?”

The women exchanged a curious look, and then smiled, Sherlock’s mother nodding just slightly.

“Alright,” Liz said, “you can go to that house over there. The one with the ghost on the roof. But come right back here when you’re done, okay?”

John nodded, and then grabbed Sherlock’s wrist, his grip gentle as he pulled him along. “Come on,” he gushed excitedly, “this house is supposed to have a pumpkin that sprays blood!”—and Sherlock could do nothing but stare.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr! And thank you all for the support and comments, you've been amazing!
A New Leaf

Chapter Summary

There will be a few autumn leaves ones, considering so many of you made requests for various derivatives of that prompt, but here is the first!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Move your arm.”

“Why?”

“Because your elbow is digging into my spleen.”

“Your spleen is on the other side.”

“Sherlock, will you just move?”

Sherlock sighed heavily, shifting just slightly where he was leaning against John’s chest.

“Thank you,” John deadpanned, looking down at the brunette mop of curls, “for doing as little as humanly possible.”

“Sure thing,” Sherlock chirped, tilting his head up to grin, and John rolled his eyes.

They were lying on Sherlock’s bed, John stretched out lengthwise toward the television at their feet while Sherlock was angled sidelong, leaning against John’s torso, his hair tickling at John’s chin.

“Besides, you deserve it,” Sherlock snapped, his voice vibrating across John’s sternum. “Making me watch these ridiculous movies.”

“This is a classic,” John argued, lifting the hand Sherlock wasn’t pinning to his side to gesture at the television. “It’s not really fall until you’ve watched It’s The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown.”

“Well, then, I suppose this is the first fall I’ve ever had,” Sherlock replied, settling his head back down into the dip of John’s shoulder, “because I have never seen this movie.”

“Oh, Sherlock,” John sighed, shaking his head, hesitating a bit longer than dramatic effect required as a whiff of Sherlock’s shampoo temporarily scrambled his words, “you’re so lucky I moved here. What a tragic life you would have led.”

“I can scarcely imagine,” Sherlock drawled, and John laughed, his head thumping against the headboard as he threw it back. “Do people really do that?” Sherlock asked suddenly, head bobbing against John’s jumper in lazy gesture to the screen.

“What?” John said, watching as Linus charged toward Charlie Brown’s neatly raked pile of leaves. “Jump in the leaves?”

“It doesn’t seem like a particularly enjoyable process,” Sherlock continued, hands shifting in the air
above his chest. “It would be cold, and they’d likely be damp, and the dirt!”

John chuckled, shrugging, and Sherlock turned his neck to glare at his audacity to move. “It’s fun,” he assured, and Sherlock raised a skeptical eyebrow. “What, you’ve never done it?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, of course not. Why would I have done something like that? And, besides,” he added, bouncing against John’s chest as he turned back to the screen, “the groundskeeper takes care of all that. I don’t think I’ve ever even seen a pile of leaves.”

John looked down at the top of the boy’s head, a frown forming on his face.

In the two years since John had moved to London, landing in the year above Sherlock at secondary school, he had orchestrated many an introduction for the brunette to things that most people would consider mundane. John had made Sherlock his first root beer float—something the detective adamantly insisted was merely ‘acceptable’ even though he drank the whole thing—taken him to his first football match, and introduced him to the wonders of street market food. In spite of the near daily occurrence of Sherlock having never done something, seen something, or even so much as heard of something, John was still occasionally surprised by the level of self-imposed isolation the boy had lived in. Not that he was taking credit—he hadn’t rushed in on a white horse and rescued him from endless rainy days playing sad songs on his violin or anything quite so dramatic—but it did weigh on him a bit, a sort of responsibility to make sure the man didn’t miss out on anything else.

“Oh,” John murmured, biting at his lip as he shifted against the pillow at his back. “Well…have you at least had apple cider?” he asked, mouth dropping open as Sherlock shook his head. “Right,” he muttered, pushing at Sherlock, who sat up, glaring in affront at the disturbance, “come on. Field trip.”

“What?” Sherlock questioned, tilting his head as John shuffled off the bed. “Where are you going?”

“We,” John amended, grabbing his jacket from where he had draped it over Sherlock’s chair, tossing the boy his coat from where it had laid beneath, “and we’re going to Sainsbury’s. Or maybe M&S; theirs is probably better.”

“For what?” Sherlock asked, but he did slide off the bed, donning his coat.

John moved to the door, opening it as he tugged his collar straight. “Cider,” he replied, beckoning at Sherlock impatiently, and, though rolling his eyes, the man followed.

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Sherlock rolled over, one eye opening as he looked at his mobile where it was screeching at him from the nightstand. With a heavy sigh, he stretched out his arm, snatching the plastic off the table and holding it aloft over his face as he turned onto his back.

It was 7:52am, much too early for anyone to even be awake, let alone sending him rapid-fire text messages, but he had three scattered over the past five minutes, all from the only person who ever texted him.

Hey you awake?

Sherloooooooock!

Wake up!!

Sherlock scrubbed a hand down his face, swiping out a reply.
Good morning to you too

Sherlock grumbled to himself, rolling his eyes.

Good morning. What do you want?

Ya know you’re a bit grumpy in the morning

Thank you for your input. Can I go back to sleep now?

No, get up. I need you to let down your hair.

What?

We need to work on your pop culture references. Open your window.

Sherlock frowned down at the screen, looking up at the closed curtains, and was just pulling the blankets off when another message chimed in.

Sherlock sniffed, shaking his head, but did get up, his toes wriggling into the carpet as he shuffled to the window. He hugged his arms, rubbing his hands against the exposed forearms peering out from his white t-shirt, and tugged at the waistband of his grey trousers, hitching them up higher on his hips. With a quick tug, he pulled his navy curtains aside, hissing at the invasion of light, and then blinked, the panes of glass slowly coming into focus. He reached for the latch, confident he was about to regret this, and unhooked the metal fixture, the cold air blowing clear to his bones as he pushed the window open. Shivering, he stuck his head out, peering side to side for whatever it was he was doing this for.

There was a whistle from somewhere to his left, and he turned, a bundled figure waving at him in the dawn light from beneath a nearly barren tree.

“Morning, sunshine!” John called, one gloved hand tucking back into the pocket of his rugby jacket, the other holding a rake at his side.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock shouted back, bouncing his knees a bit in an effort to stay warm.

“What are you doing?” John clipped, rolling his eyes. “What does it look like?”

“Burying a body,” John clipped, rolling his eyes. “What does it look like?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, ready to say something less than charitable, but then his eyes caught on the backdrop of the ridiculous scene: a massive pile of fire-hued leaves gathered into a pile that must have been up to John’s waist at the peak. Scanning over the remainder of the garden, Sherlock saw there was scarcely a leaf left anywhere else, dull green grass stretching out uninterrupted in a lopsided circle from John’s position. He opened his mouth, but, as it turned out, was too stunned for words, and John had to come to the rescue.

“What are you doing?” he called out, accusatory. “Put a coat on! You’ll freeze to death!”

“You told me to open the window!” Sherlock blustered back, and John shook his head, dropping his face to the ground.

“Just put some proper clothes on and get down here, alright?” he ordered, smiling amusedly. “And bring coffee! I’ve been out here since before 7.”
“Why would you-” He broke off, rattling his head, the argument unimportant. “Fine,” he grumbled, catching John’s face breaking into a grin before he closed the window on him, turning away and crossing the room to his wardrobe.

Ten minutes later, teeth brushed and coffee brewed, Sherlock was stepping out the back door, his scarf bundled tight about his neck.

“Oh, thank god,” John panted, snatching the mug from Sherlock’s hand. He held it in both his now-ungloved hands, breathing in the rising steam with closed eyes. “I thought I was gonna pass out.”

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock asked, slipping his hands into his pockets as he lifted his shoulder, trying to get the scarf to stretch to his ears.

“Didn’t you hear?” John said as he swallowed down a sip, tilting his head. “Your mom needed another groundskeeper. I wasn’t sure if I could make the time with rugby practice, but we worked out a schedule. You should really be more careful about closing your curtains, ya know,” John added with a smirk, and Sherlock flushed, hoping the cold would alibi him.

He did not reply, merely watching unamused as the boy took another drink of his coffee, and, finally, John sighed, lowering the cup.

“I wanted to surprise you, and that’s impossible to do when you’re awake, so...” He shrugged, eyes directed to the ground before he turned, waving an arm out behind him. “Leaves!” he announced grandly, gesturing at the pile, and Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he drawled, “clearly.”

John’s shoulders slumped as he turned back, sneering. “So you can jump in it,” he explained, and Sherlock blinked, looking back to the leaf pile with renewed trepidation.

“But I didn’t-”

“You never want to do anything at first,” John replied, surmising Sherlock’s excuse as he grabbed onto the sleeve of his coat, bending to place his coffee cup on the ground before tugging Sherlock forward, “but you always enjoy it once we get there. Come on, it’ll be fun!”

“But it’s cold,” Sherlock argued, making a token effort to tug his arm away, “and-and they’re all wet.”

“You’ll dry,” John countered, and Sherlock closed his mouth with a small huff. “Just try it, okay?” he pleaded, releasing Sherlock and turning to face him as they drew level with the pile. “You can only really jump once anyway. I’ll even do it with you.”

Sherlock looked warily at the pile of foliage, hands twitching in his pockets.

“Please?”

His eyes shifted, finding blue ones fixed on him, open and expectant, and his stomach clenched. Powerless, he nodded, and John beamed.

“Okay,” he said excitedly, waving a hand to encourage Sherlock to follow as they drew back several paces. “We’re gonna run, and then you just jump in, okay?”

“Just…jump?” Sherlock questioned, and John nodded.
“And don’t chicken out on me,” the blond snapped, lifting a finger toward Sherlock’s face, and, though Sherlock nodded, John continued to look skeptical. “Okay,” he said warily, and then, inexplicably, reached down to take Sherlock’s hand. “You ready?”

“I–” Sherlock stammered, looking down at their pressed palms, but John didn’t seem to hear him.

“Go!” the boy shouted, gripping tight to Sherlock’s hand, and then they were running, Sherlock rather blindly following the heat of John’s fingers in his.

He jumped at the appropriate time, however, John’s hand pulling away as they landed in the pile, a blur of red and yellow that was, as Sherlock had predicted, cold. It was also dirty, and Sherlock coughed as he lay on his back, brushing at what might have been a leaf fragment, might have been a poisonous insect on his face.

To his left, John laughed, and there was a rustling as the boy sat up beside him, leaves sticking to his jacket as he turned, beaming. “See?” he chuckled, leaning down to tug a leaf from Sherlock’s curls. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Sherlock looked up at John hovering over him—blue eyes twinkling with mirth, his hair silhouetted by the growing daylight—and suddenly lost his sarcastic retort right along with feeling in his legs.

John blinked down at him, his head tilting slightly as he started to frown, lips parting, and then his expression shifted something closer to afraid, eyes roving down Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock’s heart banged hard against his ribs, his breath trembling out of him, and he scanned between John’s eyes, hardly daring to believe it.

They had always been…close, he supposed. As little as he subscribed to social conventions, he did know what they were, and he knew a lot of what he and John did would not be considered normal best mate behavior. The way John smiled at him sometimes, rubbed friction over Sherlock’s perpetually cold hands when he took them in the center of his, or made no objection when Sherlock elbowed his way atop him during television marathons or movies were all a fair bit less than normal, but, in the end, Sherlock had always assumed John was letting him do those things, taking pity on him or simply being far too polite. He had never thought John would want him, that the strange tension Sherlock could sometimes feel thrumming between them might not be entirely in his head, but it was there, written plainly in the flick of John’s eyes to his lips, and, in a rush of thrilled relief, Sherlock lifted his head.

In retrospect, perhaps he shouldn’t have been the one to initiate it, should have waited for John, because, as he quickly remembered as soon as his lips brushed the blond’s, he had never kissed anyone before, and had no idea what to do. Thus, it was merely a press, a scant slide of skin on skin before he was pulling away, terrified, his mind buzzing with potential consequences of the momentary impulse.

It didn’t help that John looked nothing but stunned—no opinion one way or the other immediately obvious on his slack face—and Sherlock let his head fall back into the leaves with a crunch.

“I—I’m sorry, I–” he stammered, making to skitter away, but John moved like lightning, lifting his arm and placing a firm hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, pinning him in place.

He looked steadily into Sherlock’s eyes, head shaking dazedly as he watched the progress of his fingers, which traced up the edge of Sherlock’s cheek until they met his hair, sending a shiver through the brunette’s body that had little to do with the cold. “No,” John breathed, “don’t,” and then he bowed his head, cutting off Sherlock’s shaky exhale as their lips met again.
John was much better at this than he was, thankfully, and he happily relinquished control for once, letting John direct him with light presses against his jaw and curls.

They kissed until their lips weren’t cold anymore, and Sherlock didn’t know his hand had lifted to cup the back of John’s neck until the boy yelped against his mouth, jerking away.

“Jesus, you’re cold!” he cried, lifting away to stare at the offending digits, and Sherlock, as if John spoke the sensation into existence, shuddered.

“S-Sorry,” Sherlock chattered, and John smiled down at him, shaking his head.

“Idiot,” he muttered, moving back to kneeling in the leaves before he stood, lowering a hand down to Sherlock. “Come on,” he said as he hoisted Sherlock up beside him, “let’s go inside. Get some cider.” He grinned, prying a smile from Sherlock’s frozen face.

“Yeah, al-alright,” he mumbled, and John, after brushing a final leaf from Sherlock’s shoulder, turned back toward the house, his fingers firmly finding Sherlock’s in the space between their bodies as they walked abreast across the leaf-scattered lawn.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
Multitasking

Chapter Summary

Prompt: Librarian AU? Idk what would happen but it would be adorable x - octipops2000

I just want to throw this one at you and run! WARNING THOUGH, I'm earning that E rating now. It has begun!

Chapter Notes

Okay, this chapter might need a glossary of sorts:
Vancouver Style - the citation style used within the medical disciplines in the UK
QMUL - Queen Mary University of London, of which Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry is part
Mile End - the main library at QMUL

Also, dengue fever is a thing, but that Pratt guy isn't.
Oh, and double also, the two books mentioned are real books that center around gay characters/relationships. Shocking choice, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You will be required to use Vancouver style-”

John leaned his head over the back of his chair, counting holes in the tiles that covered the lecture hall ceiling, browned and sagging with time and water damage.

“-and 12-point Times New Roman font. The paper must be at least 8-12 pages-”

“Eight and three sentences it is,” Mike muttered, leaning in toward John’s shoulder, and John tilted his chin down with a smirk as he nodded.

“-with standard margins. I will be measuring.”

John raised an eyebrow at the professor, something that most certainly went unseen as far back as he was.

Dr. Blake was short—his suit a dull tweed, his bowtie a glaring satin—and he wore thick glasses, the kind that didn’t have visible frames, giving him the appearance of simply having abnormally large eyes as he peered blearily up at them all.

John imagined him hunched over a paper-littered desk in a small box of an office, ruler in hand as he checked every page of the countless research papers he likely had across his classes, and barely managed to suppress a smile.

“I know most of you are at least in your second year, and have likely written many papers of this sort
before—"

“Really?” John murmured, tilting his face to Mike. “Because you just spent twenty minutes telling us how to write a thesis statement.”

Mike snorted, turning it quickly into a cough, and John tried not to grin too smugly as his friend elbowed him in the side for revenge.

“-but I have received more than one paper from students older than you that are incorrectly formatted. I will be meeting with you all individually over the next couple weeks to finalize your topics. A sign-up sheet is going around for you to pick a time, but please let me know if none of those work for you, and we can schedule something else. Any questions?” The man cast a glance around the room, searching for hands John prayed wouldn’t rise, and then smiled, nodding in proud conclusion of his spiel. “Now,” he chirped, clapping his hands together as he strode across the front of the room, “we have a special guest with us today. I’m sure most of you have visited the library since its refurbishment, but there are many new programs and features that you may not be utilizing to the fullest, and that will be exceedingly helpful to you as you look to begin gathering sources for your paper—something I encourage you to start sooner rather than later.” He dipped his head, casting a ‘Procrastinators Beware!’ look around the class over his glasses. “To that end,” he continued, waving his hands toward the front row, “I’ve invited a representative from the Help Center to talk to you about the different options available. Mr. Holmes?”

A man stood up from the front row, bowing his head in thanks to the professor as the older man scuttled away to the fringes, and then, upon reaching the center, he turned to face the room.

John’s feet fell from the back of the chair in front of him with a slap.

The man was young—a year or two older than John at most—with dark brown hair that curled in an unruly crown over his face, pale and sharpened to angles that ought to be impossible outside of Greek sculptures. His lips were a prominent pink pout against the alabaster complexion, but it was his eyes where John found himself transfixed, a silver-blue that seemed to cut right through him, boring out the deep dark secrets even he himself had forgotten. As impressive as those eyes were, however, John’s attention was eventually pulled away, tracing down the man’s body. He was wearing an impeccably tailored suit in dark grey, along with a deep purple shirt, the collar of which was open and tugged slightly to the side, revealing just a sliver of a shadow of one of his collarbones.

John bit his lip. Hard.

“Hello,” the man said, and John physically shuddered, the voice washing over him in a rush of ice and fire, “I’m Sherlock Holmes, a postgraduate student here at QMUL. Studying chemistry, which is probably why they made me talk to you.”

There was a ripple of laughter through the room, but Sherlock didn’t smile, only looked confused, clearly not in on his own joke.

“So, as Dr. Blake mentioned,” he continued, waving a hand back to the professor before clasping them both back behind his back, “I work at the Help Desk at the library. The Mile End one, which is the only one you’d be using anyway, I suppose, so there’s no real need to clarify it.”

More laughter, and John smiled, thoroughly enchanted by Sherlock’s befuddled expression.

“Er, so,” the man continued, surveying the group skeptically, “I’m going to tell you a bit about what resources we have available there for you, and then you can promptly forget all of it because some celebrity is getting divorced or something equally inane you choose to allow to occupy space in your
minds.”

John grinned, watching as Sherlock frowned up at the once-again-laughing group, his forehead creasing in frustration, and John decided right then and there, something like certainty settling hot and determined in his chest.

“Oh, no,” Mike murmured, twisting in his chair as he fixed John with a look that perfectly conveyed a marriage of terror and chiding. “No. Not this again, John, come on!”

“What?” John chirped, shrugging innocently, but Mike only set his jaw.

“It’s midterm season,” he hissed, leaning in close as Sherlock continued, rattling on about the different databases available with an almost impressive amount of disinterest, “and we have a difficult schedule for rugby this year. We don’t have time for your”—he stalled, waving a hand down toward the brunette man—“fraternizing.”

“My fraternizing?” John chuckled, and Mike dipped his head, unamused. “Okay, first of all,” John continued, shifting lower into his seat as he held up a finger between them, “you don’t have to have time for anything. And, second,” he added, crooking two fingers before turning once again to Sherlock, “it’ll be fine.” He shrugged, smirk growing on his face as he watched Sherlock’s mouth move with words he didn’t hear. “I can multitask,” he said, and Mike, ever the supportive friend, groaned.

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John tugged at the strap of his backpack, trying to look nonchalant as he peered down aisle after aisle, scanning across computer tables and meeting rooms. Via a cheerleader he had dated last year who worked in the library, he had ‘Let’s catch up over coffee!’d his way into finding out Sherlock’s hours, claiming he was a friend John had needed to return a video game to.

‘You’re-You’re friends? With Sherlock Holmes?’ she had said, eyes wide and blinking at him in shock, and John had ended the conversation rather quickly after that, the reaction unsettling. He didn’t really know Sherlock, of course, but the comment still needled at him, the way her voice had dripped with such disdain over Sherlock’s name. Sure, the guy wasn’t exactly friendly, and John could see how he may rub some people the wrong way, but that was no reason to talk about him like that so casually, especially when John had just said he was his friend. I mean, it wasn’t true, but still. She hadn’t known that.

He twisted his head down yet another aisle, and then stopped, backing up a step as his eyes set on a head of hair he doubted he would ever forget.

Sherlock was standing at one of the printing stations, frowning down at a computer as he clicked furiously at the mouse, his long fingers lifting to adjust the thick-rimmed glasses that stood out in navy against his skin. He was wearing dark jeans and a grey blazer today, a white button-down rumpled and half untucked as it stretched tight across his chest, and John’s mouth went full-on Sahara.

Still, he hadn’t come this far just to look, and he hitched his bag up higher on his shoulder, nodded determinedly to himself, and then strode forward.

“How,” he began, flicking his hand in a small wave as Sherlock looked up. “It’s Sherlock, right? Sherlock Holmes?”

The man John knew full well was Sherlock nodded, eyebrow rising.
“You were in my class the other day talking about the library,” John explained, flashing his most winsome smile. “I’m John.” He held out a hand, and Sherlock looked speculatively down at it. “John Watson.”

Sherlock lifted his eyes, head tilting curiously. “I suppose the introductions would be irrelevant on my end,” he began, turning his body more fully toward John as he spoke, “but, for the sake of propriety…” He moved his hand away from the computer mouse, taking John’s own in a quick bob. “Sherlock Holmes.”

John beamed as their fingers parted, and was rewarded with a confused quirk of Sherlock’s mouth in response.

“So, did you…need something?” Sherlock asked, dipping his head, and John’s blinked, momentarily flustered before he remembered his planned excuse.

“Yeah, I was, er, actually wondering where the medical section was. Gotta find a book for that research paper.” He grinned sarcastically, flicking his eyebrows, and Sherlock twitched a brief smile before nodding off to his right.

“First floor, north side,” he replied, eyes moving back to the computer screen, an error message reflected off his glasses. “Classmark R.”

“Right,” John clipped, a little daunted by the brusque dismissal, but he never had been the type to take no for an answer. “You wouldn’t happen to have any ideas, would you?” he asked, tilting his head and frowning in a way he hoped conveyed he was completely helpless and needed a personal escort.

“What?” Sherlock muttered, forehead creasing back up to him. “For the paper?”

John nodded. “We have to analyze an epidemic,” he said, rolling a hand through the air, “so you know everyone is going to do the plague or smallpox or something, and I was trying to think of something a little more…unique.”

“A unique epidemic?” Sherlock clarified, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth as his eyebrows lifted.

John, however, far from being chagrined, only nodded. “Yeah, you know, the hipster malaria,” he replied, and Sherlock let out a bark of a laugh, and then blinked down at the desk, as if the sound had startled him. “So…thoughts?” John pressed, tipping his ear toward the man.

Sherlock flashed a glance up to him, almost suspicious, but the expression quickly smoothed over. “Dengue fever?” he offered with a shrug. “Pratt recently released a new book on its history, and I doubt many others would think of it.”

“No, probably not,” John chuckled, “seeing as they weren’t even clever enough to think to ask you.”

Sherlock blinked rather rapidly, and John’s grin grew on his face. “Yes, well,” he muttered, and then cleared his throat. “Your current professor wrote the introduction for that book, as well,” he added, turning halfway back to the screen, “so there’s probably at least five extra vanity points in it for you if you can find a source from that portion.”

John’s jaw fell slack, and then he laughed, Sherlock looking sidelong across at him with a small smile. “Should I act really surprised too?” he suggested. “I didn’t know you were a published author, professor!” he mocked, placing a stunned hand to his chest. “And with such concise and informative prose!”
“Couldn’t hurt,” Sherlock replied with a shrug and a smirk, and John laughed again before taking a small step away, staging his exit.

Baby steps, John, baby steps. Don’t wanna seem too eager.

“Right, well, cheers,” he said, lifting a hand in farewell, and, though Sherlock only returned the gesture with a flick of his fingers off the desk, John still grinned all the way home. He did make a pit stop to pick up that book though.

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The forecast hadn’t called for rain, of course, but, living in London, John really should know better by now and always carry one with him. Or, rather, surgically attach one to his hand.

He raced across the street, pulling a hand out of the pocket of his rugby jacket for a moment to briefly lift it in thanks to a waiting motorist, and then hunched his shoulders once again to the sidelong rain, trying to tuck his already soaked ears into his collar. The clothes he had changed into after the rugby game were drenched through, and he would genuinely consider changing back into the mud-splattered uniform in his bag were it not for the fact that the bag looked worrisomely damp as well.

Luckily, his favorite coffee shop was still open—a cozy place run by the only people in town who could make a decent latte—and he ducked inside, stamping his feet as best he could on the mat. He pulled out his mobile, shooting off a text to Mike to come pick him up, and then headed up to the counter, ordering the medium latte with a shot of hazelnut the barista—Molly the coffee angel, as John called her—no longer even needed to ask him if he wanted.

“How do you fit your wings under that uniform though?” he joked as he moved across to wait at the bar, and she shook her head at him, blushing furiously. “No, seriously, I wanna know.”

“John?”

He turned, a brunette woman with bright red lipstick and a sea green dress peering up at him from a nearby table. “Ms. Adler!” he exclaimed, surprised.

She rolled her eyes at him as he approached. “Irene, John, I told you. I’m a teacher, not some old woman who smells like mothballs and buys cat food in bulk.”

“Oh, how is your mother?” he quipped, and she laughed, throwing her head back as she gripped her cup with sparkling gold nails.

“Ah, how is your mother?” he quipped, and she laughed, throwing her head back as she gripped her cup with sparkling gold nails.

“You’re one to talk. You look like you got hit by a lorry,” she countered, scanning up and down over the top of her mug as she sipped.

“You’re one to talk. You look like you got hit by a lorry,” she countered, scanning up and down over the top of her mug as she sipped.

“Fullback,” John amended with a shrug, “but close enough. So, what brings you here on this miserable night? Apart from making my day, of course.” He grinned down at her as she snorted into her coffee.

“My god, you haven’t changed a bit!” she laughed, shaking her head as she lowered the cup back to the table. “I’m going to the theatre with a friend. Phantom of the Opera.”

“You’ve never seen it?” John asked, and she shook her head.

“Oh, no, I’ve seen it half a dozen times,” she said, hand waving airily, “but they have a new Christine this year, and I’m curious.”
John nodded thoughtfully, turning his head back to see how his latte was coming. “That explains the getup. You have good seats?”

Irene nodded. “Orchestra. My friend’s a member, so he always gets first pick.”

“Lucky him,” John said, smirking. “And I’m not just talking about the seats,” he added with a wink, and Irene positively cackled.

“Sorry I’m late.”

John turned at the harried voice, a tall man in a black suit bustling toward them, folding his umbrella as he went.

“Traffic was a disaster.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be if you’d use the tube like a regular person,” Irene snapped, and the man sneered at her before his eyes fell on John, where they quickly widened.

“Hey,” John said, not even able to muster enough mental acuity to raise a hand in greeting, his mind stuck on the fact that he was dripping wet on a coffee shop floor while Sherlock Holmes looked like he’d stepped off an Armani billboard.

“Hey,” Sherlock replied, looking equally floored for some reason, and John was just going to stare at him some more until Irene shifted in her chair with a squeak, drawing his attention away.

“You two know each other?” she asked, looking between them, and John hitched up a smile, forcing away his humiliation for humor, a favorite among his limited coping mechanisms.

“Sort of,” John answered, shrugging as he smiled back to Sherlock, whose eyes narrowed shrewdly, causing a twist of fear in John’s stomach he couldn’t quite understand. “Sherlock gave a talk in one of my classes about the library, and then I grilled him for inside information on the stock.”

“You didn’t—” Sherlock started, but Irene cut him off, lifting a hand between them to physically bar continued conversation that didn’t include her.

“Wait, you gave a presentation on the library?” she spluttered, gaping up at Sherlock. “You? Like… to people?”

“I didn’t want to,” Sherlock snarled, and Irene laughed, bowing her head to the floor as if her neck could no longer support it, “and I doubt I’ll be asked to do so again. Apparently, I ‘overstepped the bounds of the assignment’,” he muttered, curving his fingers in the air around the quote as he rolled his eyes.

John snorted. “Nah, you did fine,” he assured, shrugging the critique away. “That girl in the front row needed to be taken down a peg anyway.”

Sherlock just stared at him, eyes searching between John’s like he’d only just realized he had them, and John was just beginning to feel the creeping of self-consciousness at the back of his neck when Irene pushed in again.

“John and I worked on a committee together last year,” she explained, though no one had asked, but there was a smile on her face that John knew always meant much more than met the eye was afoot. “Sherlock, you remember that film festival the psychology department did with the LGBT society,” she presumed, and Sherlock’s jaw stiffened slightly even as he nodded. “Well,” Irene crooned, rising from her chair to place a hand on John’s shoulder, “John’s their events manager. He was a huge
help. Don’t know how I would’ve gotten a thing done without him.”

“I followed you around and held your posters and tape,” John corrected, and Sherlock laughed while Irene frowned at him, swatting him lightly as she pulled her hand away.

“Well, you kept hanging them crooked. That’s hardly my fault,” she insisted, dragging her fingers delicately over her sternum, and John rolled his eyes long-sufferingly at Sherlock, who bit his lip. “It’s actually rather fortuitous that I ran into you, John. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that idea I had for a fundraiser.”

“The date auction,” John surmised, nodding. “Yeah, never gonna happen.”

“But think of the money!” Irene bleated as Sherlock laughed at the display, John firmly shaking his head. “You could get the rugby team to come! You’re the captain; they have to listen to you.”

“Captain?” Sherlock questioned softly, and John spared a moment to nod at him before returning to the matter at hand.

“I’m not a dictator, Irene,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I’m not going to force my team into public humiliation. No matter how much you wanna see us in speedos.”

“But-”

“No!” he spluttered, and Sherlock actually needed to step back he was laughing so hard, but John couldn’t enjoy the moment with Irene pouting at him like she was.

“Fine,” she finally snapped primly, turning away and grabbing her clutch off the table, “but don’t come crying to me when you need new uniforms.”

“Duly noted,” John murmured as she brushed past him, and Sherlock ducked his head to hide a smile. John winked at him as the man lifted his face again, and Sherlock nearly lost it, but managed to maintain his composure, turning after Irene toward the door, which is when John noticed the book caught in his left hand. “Opera reading material?” he asked, looking back down to the cover. “Giovanni’s Room’s one of my favorites.”

“Yes, well, The Rules of Attraction takes top honors,” he said, and Sherlock frowned at him.

“But that one’s terrible,” Sherlock argued, and John couldn’t help but chuckle. “It’s just 300 pages of unresolved sexual tension and drugs.”

John laughed, twitching his shoulders. “I dunno, I like it,” he murmured, and then turned his eyes up to Sherlock with a soft smirk. “Sometimes the chase is the best part.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, as if ready to actually argue the point, and then stopped, face slackening as he blinked.

“Holmes!”
They snapped their eyes apart, an irate Irene glaring at them from the doorway.

“You are not making us late again! You know how much I hate that, everyone turning around to stare at me.”

John snorted, lifting the backs of his fingers to his mouth as he twisted his head away, shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Shut up, Watson,” she snipped, and John turned to her, hands lifted in innocence.

“I said nothing!” he bleated, and she sneered at him, turning pointedly around as Sherlock began shuffling off toward her.

“I suppose I should…” He waved a hand over his shoulder, looking every bit a man resigned to his doom.

John chuckled, nodding. “Yeah. I’ll, er, see you around the library, I guess,” he muttered, not nearly as smooth as intended, so he capped it off with a smirk. “Sooner rather than later, I hope.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, and then closed it, blinking dumbly at John in the most perfect representation of ‘deer in the headlights’ John had ever seen. He then nodded briskly, darting away after Irene, and John was left watching him, brow creasing in bemusement as the man’s long legs carried him into a cab and away.

“Hazelnut latte for Love-struck Dork,” Molly announced, planting the paper cup hard on the counter beside him.

John scowled at her, swiping up the drink. “I am not love-struck,” he snapped, breathing in the coffee-scented steam.

Molly rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Hearts-for-Eyes,” she answered skeptically, moving to another customer at the register, and John glared at the back of her head for a moment before staring out at the void Sherlock had left on the pavement.

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Over the next few weeks, John tried everything, every trick he had in his non-literal book. He spent more time in the library than he did in classes, scouting for Sherlock and then finding an excuse to stay near him.

‘Oh, you’re restocking this section? What a coincidence, I was just going to sit at this table which happens to have an excellent view of your arse on that ladder!’

Of course, most of that remained unsaid, but John was working overtime with subtext. His innuendos were getting downright shameful, the bottom of the barrel of come-ons, but he couldn’t get anything out of Sherlock, nothing more than the occasional faint blush and cleared throat.

Although, perhaps that wasn’t fair, because he was actually learning a whole lot about the man.

Sherlock Holmes was the self-proclaimed black sheep of an uppityest-of-the-upper-class family, a chemist in a world of bankers and lawyers. He had a perhaps-ought-to-be-worrisome interest in the macabre, frequently mentioning the latest murder reported in the papers, and chatting enthusiastically with John about everything from surgical techniques to the ugliest of disease symptoms while still managing to eat his lunch—typically John’s bag of crisps, considering the man never had anything and tended to eat without noticing while he talked. His parents were deceased, had been for some time, and his brother was some bigwig in the government, something Sherlock dismissed the prestige
of with a roll of his eyes and flick of his hand.

He also smelled like rain and cinnamon, and his voice got higher when he talked about tobacco ash—though John could no longer remember why he had asked what all 200-odd kinds were—and he liked his coffee black with two sugars, but sometimes got embarrassed about taking more than one (John always grabbed some himself for this reason, even though he didn’t use it), and he always wore dress shoes, and his eyes were at least six different colors, and he didn’t make any fucking sense!

To any outside observer, it would have looked like they’d been dating for at least the past two weeks, but John didn’t even know if he was gay yet, something he was currently bemoaning to Mike as they sat on his bed, John stretched out to let his head hang off the edge.

“I just don’t get it!” he cried, thrusting his hands into the air. “I even pulled the eyelash-on-your-cheek trick yesterday! The eyelash trick! Do you know how desperate I have to be to try that?”

Mike made some sort of affirmative mumble to his left.

“And do you know what he did?” John snapped, turning his head in the direction of his friend.

“What did he do?” Mike dutifully asked.

“Thanked me!” John cried, arms flinging up to the sky before bringing his hands down to grind into his eyes. “Honest-to-god thanked me. And not even in that lingering eye contact kind of way.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a lingering-eye-contact thank you,” Mike murmured, looking thoughtfully up at the ceiling. “Is it a guy thing?”

“Mike!”

“Well, what do you want me to say?” Mike spluttered, rattling his head. “I can barely help you with girls, let alone this!”

John groaned, letting his neck loll back so his head thumped against the side of the mattress. “I don’t know what to do,” he whined miserably, pinching his eyes shut, and Mike sighed heavily above him.

“Look, I’m not some magical gay guru, alright?” Mike said, and John snorted. “But it seems to me the only thing to do at this point is ask him. Otherwise, you’ll end up in that awkward relationship where you’re too good of friends to risk sex, and too attracted to one another to be any good at friends.”

John blinked, rolling up to sitting to get a proper look at his friend. “Where did that come from?” he blurted, and Mike glowered at him.

“Oh my god,” he breathed, and John instantly frowned in foreboding. “You—You’re really gone on him, aren’t you? Like…like Morstan gone on him!”
“Can we stop using my Year 10 girlfriend as a benchmark?” John snapped, and then sighed, hanging his head as he ground at his temples. “I don’t know, Mike,” he breathed, collapsing back to staring upside-down at the wall. “I really don’t know.”

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“Are you alright?”

“What?” John looked up, Sherlock frowning at him quizzically. “Oh, yeah, sorry.” He rattled his head, closing his book on his thumb to mark the page. “You on break?”

Sherlock shook his head. “Not yet. Have another couple sections to do.” He motioned out toward his right, and then returned to clutching at the books in his hands, eyes focused down on the covers. “I shouldn’t be much longer though, if you- if you wanted to wait.”

“Yeah, sure,” John confirmed, smiling as if he wouldn’t have waited no matter what. “You want me to walk over with you?”

“You don’t have to,” Sherlock mumbled, but John was already packing up his things.

“No, don’t worry about it. The view’s much better over there anyway.”

“You don’t know where I’m going,” Sherlock chuckled, and John slung his bag over his shoulder with a grin.

“No, but I know you’re gonna be there,” he said, flashing a wink, but Sherlock—predictable as it was disappointing—only smiled faintly and walked away, beckoning John follow with a tilt of his head.

John sighed, but did drag along after him, powerless to make any other choice when Sherlock wore the dark wash jeans. Or the grey trousers. Or the black pinstripe ones. Oh god, he really was a lost cause, wasn’t he?

He sat on the floor, his laptop open on his crossed legs as Sherlock flitted from shelf to shelf around him, the two of them keeping up a steady stream of conversation as he filed the books away.

“So what do you think you’ll do after you graduate?” John asked, peering up to where Sherlock was stretching to reach a high shelf, his deep green shirt pulling taut over his torso.

“I don’t know,” Sherlock replied, his back shrugging as he moved away. “Stay in London, of course—everywhere else is tedious—but, beyond that, I don’t really know.”

“Ever thought about forensics?” John asked, once again looking up from his paper due tomorrow, a mark that felt like the end of a fruitless circle with the brunette librarian who had started it.

“Forensics?” Sherlock parroted, turning over his shoulder to frown briefly.

“Yeah,” John shrugged. “I mean, you figured out those murders last week just from stuff in the paper. You could probably do a whole lot more with proper evidence.”

“‘Stuff in the paper’ is usually all the evidence necessary,” Sherlock said, tossing him a smile, and then he turned back to his books. “I don’t know, maybe,” he mused, turning a particular blue-covered one over a few times in his hands. “Maybe not forensics, but…a detective. Or something of that sort. I could probably do that.”

Sherlock smiled shyly, tucking his blushing face away as he finished shelving the book, and then he moved back to the stack on a nearby table, allowing John the freedom to pull a self-disgusted face.

‘You’re brilliant’ he internally mocked at himself, mashing bitterly at the keyboard, and then, suddenly, the screen went dark. “Woah,” he blurted, instinctively lifting his hands away. The screen returned a moment later, blinking back into life, but it was blank, his desktop staring up at him, no Word document in sight.

His heart stopped, his palms instantly breaking out into a cold sweat, and he was already starting to hyperventilate before his mind had even fully caught up with his predicament.

“Fuck,” he breathed, hands twitching toward and away from the keyboard, wanting to do something, but with no idea where to start. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“What?” Sherlock said, and there was a loud thump as he abandoned his books on the table, rushing to John’s side.

“I- It- My paper,” John stammered, blinking at the screen as the blissful numbness of shock settled over him. “It’s- The screen went black and it- It’s due tomorrow.” Aaaaaaand the panic was back, thundering beneath his ribs as his mouth filled with acrid terror. “It’s due tomorrow! It was nine pages and it’s due tomorrow!”

“I thought it was eight?”

“Sherlock!”

“Sorry, sorry,” the man muttered, settling down next to John on the floor. “Here, let me see it,” he said, already taking the computer from John’s lap.

“What am I gonna do?” John wheezed, his vision blurring a bit at the edges. “It’s worth 30% of our grade! Even if I did perfect on all the exams-”

“Which you could.”

“I still wouldn’t have a prayer of passing! And clinical placements are next year! If I don’t do well in my classes-”

“Dr. Blake will understand,” Sherlock said, interrupting John’s downward spiral with his low, calm tone. “I’m sure he’d give you an extension. And, if he doesn’t, we can always threaten to expose the sexual harassment lawsuit a student filed against him a few years ago.”

“But what if I can’t- Wait, what?”

Sherlock nodded, though he did not look up, his eyes intently focused down at John’s screen as he fished his glasses out of his pocket, sliding them up on the bridge of his nose with a finger. “I’m not sure how much truth there was to it, to be honest, but that hardly matters for our purposes.”

“I- No,” John muttered, rattling his head. “I don’t want to threaten anyone, Sherlock, I just want to pass this class so I don’t end up only using a scalpel to scrape gum off park benches!”

“Bit of a leap, don’t you think?” Sherlock replied, smiling as he lifted his eyebrows in taunt, and
John was about to rip his oh-so-pretty little head off when the man turned the laptop on his palm, passing it back across to John. "There," he said, and John's fingers closed around the edges of the plastic as he stared down at the sentence he had left off on, angels actually singing somewhere above him, he was sure of it.

"I- You fixed it," he murmured, blinking in disbelief, his mouth agape as he turned to the brunette. Sherlock smiled, shrugging a shoulder as he scratched at the back of his neck. "Now you can use scalpels on people," he joked.

John chuckled, still a bit dazed. "I- Thank you," he said, grin growing on his face as he turned away from the screen. "Guess you've got the magic touch, huh?"

Of all the things John had expected to happen, what actually did was not on the list.

Sherlock's face fell, the shy amusement that had been creasing over it shattering to something cold and hollow that knocked the breath clear out of John's lungs. He blinked, his chin turning pointedly away, and then he pushed up to standing, several steps away before John had even caught up with him moving at all.

"Sherlock?" he called, but the man didn't stop, and John haphazardly disentangled himself from the cord of his laptop before scrambling up after him. "Sherlock?!" he tried again, but the brunette barreled on ahead, and after receiving a glare or two for his volume, he fell silent, focusing on keeping up. He lost him a couple times, racing between aisles until he caught a head of curly hair in the corner of his eye again, and, finally, he watched the man dart into a door across the room, the one John knew led to the library offices.

He raced over to it, tugging at the handle and flinging it aside, and was then met with a long corridor, doors upon doors lining the sides. He would have gone knocking on each and every one of them, had it come to that, but, thankfully, he had arrived just in time to see one on the end closing, and headed directly for it, hoping Sherlock had left it unlocked. He had, and John nearly fell inside, searching around the white-walled room.

Sherlock was leaning against his desk next to his chair, his back to John as he seemingly stared at the wall, and his fingers were clutched white against the dark wood on either side of his hips.

"What the hell, Sherlock?" John spouted, closing the door behind him before stepping into the room. "What are you doing? Why'd you take off like that?"

"It's nothing," Sherlock said, shaking his head, though he did not turn around. "I just forgot I had something to do."

"And you couldn't just say that?" John snapped, and Sherlock turned, shooting a glare across at him before he pulled the chair out, lowering himself into it.

"It was a pressing matter," he clipped, folding his fingers in front of him on the desk, "and one I would just assume deal with alone, if you don't mind."

John's jaw dropped open, fairly sure one of those aforementioned scalpels had just lodged itself firmly in his chest. "I-" he stammered, and Sherlock turned his face away, shuffling at papers on his desk, his jaw set. John swallowed, his heart hardening. "Fine," he bit, and turned, grasping the handle and tugging the door open.

Halfway through his exit, however, he paused, a thought occurring to him, and he stepped backward into the room again, closing the door with a click as he spun back. "Was it the magic touch?"
he asked, and Sherlock froze, answer enough for John. “Because I-I didn’t mean to-” He took a shaky step into the room, weeks of carefully constructed scaffolding collapsing around him in an instant. “I didn’t mean to make you...uncomfortable. I just-”

“You didn’t make me uncomfortable,” Sherlock interjected, though he sounded awfully bitter for someone who wasn’t bothered. “Why would it make me uncomfortable? Why would any of it make me uncomfortable?” He looked up, and John almost wished he hadn’t, the blazing in his eyes somehow both terrifying and so, so sad. “I mean, it’s just a game, right?” he muttered, a spasm of a shrug moving through his shoulders. “Just you. Just John.”

John staggered back a step, feeling his own name like a physical blow.

“It’s not like you mean anything by it,” Sherlock finished, flourishing it with a crack of paper on his desk as he straightened the edges of the stack in his hands.

The room was so quiet, the soft shuffles of Sherlock’s fingers over pages the only whisper of sound to be found, and John could hear his own heart beginning to kick up from stalled in his chest.

“You-You think this is...a game?” he breathed, head shaking incredulously.

Sherlock’s fingers froze, and he looked cautiously up at John out of the tops of his eyes as the blond moved closer.

“You think I just- What? That I just do this?” John railed, flinging his hands out to his sides, weeks of desperate frustration finally breaking free. “That I just flirt with random people for weeks and hope they’ll notice? You really think that’s fun for me, Sherlock? You think any of this has been fun?”

“I- I didn’t-” Sherlock’s lips were parted, his eyes wide and frantic as he softly shook his head, but John didn’t give him a chance to continue.

“So, all this time,” he raged, glaring furiously down at the now-meek brunette, “all this time, you thought I was just fucking around? That you were just, what? The flavor of the week?”

Sherlock winced, turning his face away as his fingers fidgeted with the edge of a sheet of paper on his desk, and that unspoken affirmation knocked the wind right out of John’s incensed sails.

His breath huffed out of him, almost a laugh, though nothing was remotely funny. “You did,” he murmured, the words like bile in his mouth, and he swallowed down the shame as he dropped his eyes away. “You really thought that.”

Sherlock said nothing, only bit at his lip as he continued to avert his eyes, and John rallied, pulling what little composure he could together with a deep breath.

“Sherlock, I- It wasn’t- It was never like that.” He shook his head, frowning at the wall to his right as he thought. “And I- I guess I can see how you would think that, but- God!” He dropped his face, pinching at the bridge of his nose for another few slow breaths. “Okay, yeah, I flirt,” he admitted briskly, shrugging. “I do, probably more than I should, but surely, surely you know you’re different.” He chuckled, a miserable sort of hybrid between a laugh and a sob, and Sherlock looked up at him, his eyes screaming shock. “I mean, how could you not? I-I’m here all the time! I know what your break schedule is, for chrissake!” He ran a hand through his hair, pacing slightly to abate the rising nervous energy. “And I only bring salt and malt vinegar crisps now because you like those best, and I helped you alphabetize—which is torture in some countries, I’m pretty sure—and the barista at the café has said we look cute together at least three times. I mean”—he turned to the man, arms falling helplessly to his sides—“how could you not know? How could you think there had ever been
anyone like you?”

Sherlock didn’t move, didn’t even appear to breathe. He stared at John over his desk, eyes wide with something like terror as his lips hovered apart, and, slowly, the silence started whispering in John’s ear, assuring him he’d made a fool of himself.

“I— I’m sorry, I— Clearly, I have completely freaked you out.” He chuckled, his default humor promptly rising to shield him, but he could still feel the ache, the spot where his very first might-have-been would permanently settle. “I’ll just—go,” he muttered, stepping backward as he lifted a thumb to the door behind him. “Leave the country or something. I hear Australia’s nice. They have those spiders, though. Maybe Spain? I don’t know, I’ll figure it out.” He laughed, a horrible, high, nervous sound, and he quickly cut it off, his hand grasping the handle behind his back. “Anyway, bye,” he blurted, twisting as fast as momentum could carry him to the door.

“Wait!”

John flinched, sucking his lips in around his teeth as his shoulders hunched defensively.

“I—” There was a small sound of movement, a chair squeaking and clothes rustling as feet stepped softly on the floor. “John.”

Slowly, eyes still pinched as if expecting a punch, John turned, gaze downcast as he peered across at Sherlock through his lashes.

Sherlock was standing, out from behind his desk, but still against the wall, his hands shifting nervously at his sides. He stared at John a moment, mouth moving soundlessly, and then there was a soft exhale of breath as he dropped his head, licking over his lips before rolling them over his teeth. Hesitantly, he peered up, bottom lip caught between his teeth as John looked at his eyes through his lashes, and, in that moment, he dared consider the possibility he’d been dreaming of for almost a month.

“You—” he began, but that was as far as he got, and, after an hour of a second, Sherlock nodded, just a small twitch of his head before he smiled a self-conscious grimace that nearly killed John where he stood. He took a breath, just a single steadying pass of air, and the terror began to ease from him, something like elation bubbling through his veins instead. “Oh,” he murmured, and, upon realizing his hand was still on the doorknob, he shifted his fingers, finding the lock.

The button depressed with the loudest click mankind had ever borne witness to, and Sherlock blinked down at it in alarm while John took it as a starting gun, crossing the room at gold medal speed.

He would have to check Sherlock for a concussion later, his head slamming against the wall so hard it knocked off his glasses, but he didn’t appear to be overly disorientated as he pressed eagerly back against John’s mouth the second the shock wore off. Long fingers gripped hard against John’s waist, holding on more than anything as John pinned him to the wall with his body, one hand tangling roughly in Sherlock’s hair while the other rested on his hip.

It had been far too long, far too many days watching those lips and nights dreaming about them for John to wait, but Sherlock didn’t seem to mind, parting his lips with a small moan as John slid his tongue across the seal. He swept first across Sherlock’s tongue, which chased his as it danced across the surface, and then tilted his head, deepening the kiss as he licked a stripe over the roof of the man’s mouth.

Sherlock shook against him, one hand remaining to tug at John’s shirt while the other lifted to the
back of neck, more of an anchor than a pull. His pale fingers slid into John’s hair, tugging just slightly, and John groaned, thrusting his hips up to lock Sherlock’s to the wall. The brunette gasped against his mouth, his lips pulling away as his head lolled back, chin lifting, and John took the opportunity to move down his jaw.

He licked, kissed, and nipped his way down the pale stretch of Sherlock’s neck, and, by the time he reached those damnable collarbones, Sherlock was a mess before him, trembling and panting as his fingers dug into John’s scalp.

“John!” he gasped as John bit at the juncture of his neck, sending a renewed shiver through the man’s body. “Oh god, John!”

Heat rocketed down John’s spine at the raspy words, and he growled, hitching his hips up against Sherlock’s, and Sherlock yelped in his ear as John ground his hipbone against the prominent stretch across the front of Sherlock’s jeans.

Maybe they shouldn’t, maybe it was too soon, but, my god, they’d been dating for at least a week now no matter what way you looked at it, and Sherlock was flushed, and his eyelids were fluttering in blissed out spasms, and fuck John wanted to take him all the way apart.

Slowly, slow enough to be stopped at any moment, John lifted his hand, trailing it down Sherlock’s torso until it rested at the buckle of his belt. He pulled away from Sherlock’s mouth, the both of them just standing there breathing one another’s gasps, and leaned his forehead against the paler one, blinking Sherlock’s face into focus. “Do you-”

“Yes.”

John blinked, pulling his head further away. “Wait, what?”

Sherlock’s head lolled forward when John stopped supporting it, but he caught it, lifting his face back up to John’s as he blinked out of his trance. “What?”

“Do you want to…?” John asked, hooking a finger beneath the waistband of Sherlock’s jeans, and Sherlock twitched, swallowing hard.

“Yes, I said yes,” he snapped, as if they weren’t talking about sex acts, and John smiled in spite of himself.

“I was going to ask if you minded that first time,” he explained, and Sherlock glared at him with a fury John thought it best to laugh about later.

“Why the hell would you-”

John swallowed the rest of the man’s outrage, smothering Sherlock’s lips with his own as he made quick work of the man’s belt, opening the top button and peeling down the zipper with similar ease. With a little adjusting of the boxers, Sherlock’s cock sprung free, already leaking in John’s hand, and Sherlock moaned around his tongue as John began to slide up and down the twitching shaft.

The man grew more and more uncoordinated as John went on, and, by the time John was swirling his fingers between Sherlock’s balls with every downward stroke, the man was barely managing to breathe with any success, John having moved on to sucking at his neck. It still wasn’t enough, however, not quite, not even for right now, so John pulled away, tugging at Sherlock’s jeans and boxers until they had both fallen free from his hips.

Temporarily released from John’s grip, Sherlock’s cock twitched against his stomach, flushed and
dripping, and John licked at his lips, not realizing Sherlock had been watching until the man whimpered. John looked up at him, a question in a small lift of his eyebrows, and Sherlock, eyes wide with disbelief, managed a nod.

John practically collapsed to his knees, taking Sherlock in hand once more as he swiped a few preliminary strokes, and then he lowered his head, swirling his tongue around the drenched tip.

Sherlock gasped, body rattling against the wall as he fought the impulse to thrust, and John smiled as he sucked the head into his mouth, tongue twisting all the while. Slowly, his hand working in tandem, he moved down Sherlock’s length until it was almost to the back of his throat, and then, in one swift slide, he dragged his lips up to the head before swallowing back down.

The entire building probably heard Sherlock, which didn’t bother John any, and was, in fact, so unbearably hot that John had to make him do it again and again, breaking prim and proper Sherlock Holmes into smaller and smaller pieces with every slide of his lips over flushed twitching skin. At some point, Sherlock’s hand came to rest in hair, and the touch, so gentle in juxtaposition of the situation, was somehow John’s breaking point, and he moved his hand to his own jeans, shifting on the floor to manage to peel away the layers covering his own arousal.

Sherlock hissed what sounded like a profanity as John took his own cock in his left hand, the other still working at the base of Sherlock’s, and, when John slid over the tip of his own, spreading the slickness down the shaft, they both groaned.

“John!” Sherlock gasped, fingers tightening just slightly in John’s hair. “John, I-I-”

John moaned, moving the hand on Sherlock from his cock to his hip as he pinned him with bruising force, and that seemed to be it for Sherlock, who cried out as he spilled over John’s tongue, his body trying helplessly to thrust beneath John’s hold. Sucking him clean, John pulled off with a slow drag and a pop, and then rested his forehead against Sherlock’s hip as he pumped his own cock furiously. The taste of Sherlock still in his mouth, he came, spilling over his hand with a groan and a gasp as his head sank to Sherlock’s thigh.

An incalculable amount of time later, he returned to his body, breathing raggedly against Sherlock’s pale thigh as he pulled his hand away, hesitating a moment before realizing he had no choice but to wipe it on his jeans. Lifting his face, he nosed a small distance up along the inside of Sherlock’s leg, planting a small nip near the juncture of his groin, and the brunette made a sort of choking sound before his knees seemed to give out, and he slowly slid to the floor in front of John, legs bent up ridiculously between them.

John laughed, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand as he shifted away to give them more room. “’Ya alright?” he chuckled, and Sherlock, in spite of looking like he’d just run a half-naked marathon, glared at him.

“Shut up,” he chided, shaking his head, and John smirked, tilting his head.

“Make me,” he taunted, and Sherlock’s eyes somehow managed to darken even further. “Wow, okay, no,” John murmured, rattling his head to loosen certain impossible thoughts. “No, we have to- We have to get dressed.”

Sherlock chuckled, but nodded, and the rather awkward process of locating, fastening, and trying to clean began, culminating in at least that last one being given up as a lost cause.

“Is it really obvious?” John asked, wiping in vain at the stain on his jeans.
“No,” Sherlock answered, tucking in his shirt. “People may just think you’re incontinent.”

“Nice,” John sneered, and Sherlock grinned. “Last blowjob you get for a while.”

“What?” Sherlock asked, expression suddenly startled.

John tilted his head, confused. “What do you mean ‘what’?”

“A while,” Sherlock said, pointing at him. “You said a while.”

“Well, yeah,” John answered, shrugging. “I mean, I wouldn’t make you wait too long, but, if you’re gonna be ungrateful—”

“No, I mean—” He held John’s eyes a moment longer, mouth open, and then huffed in frustration, turning away before being able to look back at him. “I mean you want to do that again? You want to do things like that? With me?”

John blinked, his eyebrows slowly rising. “Yes,” he drawled, “I thought I made that fairly—”

“You still like me?” Sherlock interjected, frowning, as if exceptionally irritated with the lack of logic he was being presented with. “I mean, even now that you— You still want me?”

John stared at the man in front of him, unable to believe he was even being asked this. He almost said as much, but then he thought, considered the sort of path Sherlock must have travelled to think so little of his worth, and, with as much determination as he had first set out with, John was now determined to make sure he proved Sherlock wrong.

Smiling softly, he moved in front of the man, cupping his jaw with his hand. “Of course, I want you,” he assured, sliding a thumb across Sherlock’s cheekbone. “It was hell trying to get you,” he added, and Sherlock chuckled, tucking his face into John’s palm. “I’m not giving you up now.”

Sherlock stared at him, blinking slowly, and then a smile bloomed on his face, the first one of its kind John had ever seen on those pale features. “It wasn’t exactly easy for me either, you know,” he muttered, pulling John’s hand from his face to tangle their fingers. “You look awfully good in that rugby uniform.”

John beamed, and Sherlock watched him warily, pulling his hand away as he stepped back.

“Oh no,” he murmured, but it was far too late.

“When did you see me in my rugby uniform, Sherlock?” John teased, cheeks aching from how wide he was smiling. “I never wore it here, so you must have seen it somewhere else.”

“You left your computer out there,” Sherlock muttered, brushing past John to the door. “We should go get it.”

“Around campus maybe?” John continued, following after him as the man bolted down the corridor. “Or at a game?”

Sherlock’s steps faltered, his teeth coming up over his lip as his neck began to flush.

“Oh my god!” John cried, triumphant. “You went to a game! You totally went to a game!”

“I did not.”

“Did you take pictures?”
“What? No!”

“Make a little rugby uniform shrine in your room?”

“I take it back, you look horrible in your uniform. Completely the wrong color.”

“Do you think you have enough to make a calendar? Because that might make a good fundraiser.”

“I hate you.”

John laughed, turning a grin on the morose looking man walking alongside him. “Well, that’s just too bad,” he chirped, and Sherlock turned to him, curious, “because I’ve grown awfully fond of you, Sherlock Holmes. Awfully fond indeed.”

And Sherlock, in spite of a valiant effort to keep his lips pressed shut, laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, can anyone sympathize with me on how awkward it is to proofread a blowjob, because I need to talk about this!
Chapter Summary

Prompt: John expects Sherlock to hate Halloween like he does every other holiday, but is extremely surprised when he finds out Sherlock is a total nerd for all things spooky - angstective

Prompt: Carving pumpkins - anon

Prompt: Retirement!lock where the kids in the nearby cottages all go trick-or-treating and Sherlock is determined to have the spookiest house on the street - mycroftcakeholmes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John walked along the country lane, reusable cloth bags he miraculously managed to remember to bring with him this time laden down with groceries from the small shop in town. Looking out over the weatherworn fence that lined the lane, his eyes roved along the edge of the field where the trees were slowly catching fire with every day’s descent into autumn. A breeze picked up across the landscape, lifting the leaves that crunched at his feet into a temporary whirlwind before setting them back down again, and John hunched his shoulders against the chill, quickening his steps.

They’d been in Sussex almost a year now, having moved in early December of last year, but it was still surprising to John how much he enjoyed it, how quickly he had settled into this quiet life of trips to the farmers’ stalls for produce and freshly-drawn milk—although, to be fair, that he tried not to dwell on too long—and evenings by the fire that weren’t interrupted with police sirens. At least, not live ones, but Sherlock had insisted on getting satellite television so he could watch the local London news, calling Dimmock every few days with a tip.

Lestrade, for his part, had also retired, living with Molly and their three children in a suburb just outside of London, where she was now teaching at the local university. The Lestrades drove up to visit them every now and again—much more often than John could convince Sherlock to visit their place, at any rate—and the kids would run through the garden, avoiding John’s failing flowers and peering in at Sherlock’s beehives when the man wasn’t looking.

One of the boys—Kevin, the oldest at 8—showed a particular interest in the bees, and Sherlock paid him special attention, sneaking him sweets when his parents and siblings—and John, ostensibly—were distracted.

It was on these such occasions that Molly would turn to him fondly, watching the interaction across the room, and then look back to where John always sat by the fire, tilting her head gently at him.

“Are you certain you’ll never want any?” she would ask, an old inquiry. “He’s so good with them.”

And John would shake his head, assuring her yet again that they were just fine, just the two of them wasting away with the dog she had bought them out of poorly-masked pity a few years ago—a female Irish Setter Sherlock had pronounced Anne Bonny before John had even opened his mouth to
Molly, ever the gentle heart, would look at him kindly, as if seeing through to his nonexistent pain, and John would flick a pleading glance to Lestrade, who would promptly suggest more wine, ending the inquisition.

For now, however, it was just the three of them—John, Sherlock, and Anne—as the holiday season was not quite yet upon them, the visitors still, for the moment, preferring their own homes. It was the day before Halloween, and John had opened the glorified pamphlet of a town paper that morning to find an announcement about the children from the local cottages trick-or-treating in a large parade through their small village, apparently a town tradition. John suspected it had been printed solely for their benefit, being that they were the only newcomers, and had thus pointed it out to Sherlock, still amused at the eccentricities of rural life.

Sherlock, however, had not seen the humor, and had instead seized the paper, scanning through the article. “They interviewed Old Man Prentiss,” he had snapped, tapping at the spot in the print.

“I’m not sure we can call him that,” John had reprimanded gently. “He’s not much older than us.”

“He’s missing teeth,” Sherlock countered, as if that settled it, and John hadn’t been in the mood to argue. “Apparently, he ‘goes all out’ with decorations,” the man continued, bobbing his head along with the quote. “Inflatable ghosts, animatronic skeletons, strobe lights!? My god, it sounds like one of your horrible action movies!” John hadn’t replied, allowing the man instead to continue to the conclusion of his tirade. Sherlock had lowered the paper, brow furrowing before he nodded, clearly decided on an answer to some unspoken question. “Well then,” his clipped, folding the paper in half and tossing it aside, “we’ll just see who ends up in the paper this year.”

“What?” John had foolishly asked, turning from where he’d been blissfully making tea. “What do you mean?”

Sherlock had given him the look, and John had given him the stop-giving-me-the-look look, and Sherlock had sighed, rolling his eyes. “We have to have a better house than Old Man Prentiss,” he explained patiently, hands shifting in gesture between their chests.

John had blinked at him, still somehow surprised by the detective. “You know this isn’t a competition, right?” he had said, but Sherlock had already been darting away to collect a pen and paper. “It’s supposed to be fun. For the kids.”

“It’ll be fun,” Sherlock had assured, though his tone was anything but convincing. “Now, go into town and get these things,” he’d ordered, tossing John the notepad, where he had caught it clumsily on his chest. “I’ll get to work here while you’re gone. The game is on!” He had then darted away, a grand charge made ridiculous by the fluttering of his dressing gown, but John had dutifully walked down the road, shaking his head and smiling all the while.

It wasn’t an absurd list, really, and John was having no trouble carrying the items. Batteries, wire, duct tape, sweets (of course), and apple cider had been the only things Sherlock had requested, but John had thrown in a few extras, including the strawberry Cornettos Sherlock pretended not to like.

As he drew up to their cottage, pushing the gate inward with his hip, Anne bounded out to meet him from the back, where she had likely been running circles around the pond, a favorite pastime of hers since they had moved here, especially when the ducks were in residence.

“Hey, Annie,” John greeted, adding the suffix of endearment Sherlock staunchly disapproved of.
The dog pushed against his legs, nearly toppling him, her mind not quite caught up to realize how much her body had grown, and John laughed, patting her side until she was contented enough to let him pass.

“Where’s Daddy?” John asked, voice rising the way one’s always did when speaking to a pet, and Annie barked, bounding away as if to guide him. She stopped at the front door, and John pushed it open, allowing her to pad through first before he followed, glancing through rooms as he passed.

It was a large cottage, all things considered, with hardwood floors and crown moldings that were probably older than him and Sherlock combined, but it was warm and inviting, thick carpets and roaring fires that illuminated their simple furnishings. They had three bedrooms, but only used one, the master upstairs that had a view out to the woods and a fireplace in the corner, and the others remained mostly in a state of well-dusted limbo as they awaited guests. Sometimes, though, in the middle of the night, John would wake up alone, padding down the creaking steps to find Sherlock passed out across one of the quilts in a spare bedroom, exhausted from one of the countless experiments John doubted he would ever see the end of, and he would gently rouse him, half carrying him up the stairs to deposit him onto his side of the mattress. It was quiet, and it was simple, and, as much as ten-years-ago-John would never have believed him, he was happy.

At least, he had been, before he’d followed Anne into the kitchen to find Sherlock elbow-deep in a pumpkin, stringy orange guts splattered across his safety goggles and every other surface in the room.

“What the hell are you-”

“Do you have a scalpel?” Sherlock held out his hand expectantly, though his eyes never left the surface of the pumpkin he had probably stolen from their neighbors, yet another apology call John was going to have to make.

“Do I have a- Sherlock, there’s pumpkin all over the kitchen!” John railed, but the detective only nodded.

“Astute as ever, Doctor Watson. Now, scalpel?”

John glared down at him, setting his jaw, and then huffed, settling the bags on the floor before marching pointedly loud to the living room. He retrieved the instrument from his medical bag where it sat beneath his writing desk—“You can’t call it a writing desk, John, you blog! You’re not Dickens, for heaven’s sake,” Sherlock was fond of scoffing. The worn brown leather of his bag was touched less and less often now, but it was still just as soft, and John spared a moment for a nostalgic smile before moving back to the kitchen.

“Here,” he snapped, passing the sharp object down to the bane of his existence, who had pumpkin in his hair too John could see now that he was closer.

“Thank you,” Sherlock said, something he was getting better at little by little, and John, in spite of the hours he knew it would take to clean this up, smiled.

“What are you doing, anyway?” he asked, trying to move around to Sherlock’s side, but Sherlock lunged forward, covering his work.

“It’s not done!” he bleated, looking up at John, and he looked so wholly ridiculous, clutching a pumpkin for dear life, that John laughed, shaking his head as he moved back toward the door.

“Alright, alright,” he relented, lifting his hands. “I’ll wait until you’re done. See the full masterpiece.
Hey, is pumpkin carving anything like sculpting?” he teased, quirkling his head mockingly as he began backing away in preparation. “You know, where you see the angel in the gourd and carve until you set it free?”

As soon as Sherlock’s arm moved, John dove around the doorjamb, a lump of sticky pumpkin guts landing on the floor just past where he’d been standing.

“You’re cleaning that up,” he clipped, poking his head back around the corner, and Sherlock glared at him through his flecked glasses. Chuckling, John moved back into the kitchen, stopping short as Sherlock twitched toward his artwork again. “I’m not gonna look,” he sighed, rolling his eyes, and then stretched down to pull the pumpkin from Sherlock’s hair, the man leaning into the touch, “I just gotta put the groceries away. What do you need apple cider for anyway?”

“For the trick-or-treaters,” Sherlock explained, turning back to his carving as he periodically cast wary glances at John over his shoulder, checking for peeking John had no intention of doing, but he did fake it a few times just for kicks. “The forecast says it will be cold tomorrow.”

John paused, hand halfway outstretched to store the batteries in their usual cupboard. “That’s… extremely thoughtful of you,” he said, turning back to the detective, who shrugged.

“It was only logical,” he murmured, and John smiled, moving to bend back down to the grocery bags, and then stilled, his gut churning with a question.

“No,” he replied, and then lifted his eyes as they widened in alarm. “Not that- I mean, if you-”

“No!” John exclaimed, shaking his hands in front of him. “No, I- I mean, kids are great and all, but...I like when they go home, ya know?”

Sherlock chuckled, bobbing his head. “Yes, they are rather more tolerable on a temporary basis,” he agreed, and John laughed, rubbing up the back of his neck.

“Hey, you think we should invite Greg and Molly?” John asked, the oversight suddenly occurring to him, and Sherlock frowned up at him, lips pouting confusedly.

“Greg?” he drawled, and John rolled his eyes.

“You have got to be- IT’S BEEN THIRTY YEARS!” he blustered, hands flailing out to his sides. “You’ve known the man thirty years, how can you still not remember his first name?”

“Thirty… Wait, Lestrade?” Sherlock questioned, tilting his head.

“Yes!” John exclaimed, but he was already starting to laugh. “Greg Lestrade. How can you not remember this, honestly?”

Sherlock shrugged, shaking his head as he returned to his work. “Must have deleted it,” he dismissed, and John laughed, leaning against the counter as he shook his head up at the ceiling.

“You’re a piece of work, Sherlock Holmes,” he muttered, smiling fondly down at the man, who was clearly trying not to smirk. “A real piece of work.”

“And yet, here you are,” Sherlock replied, lifting his eyebrows.
John smiled, pushing off the counter, pointedly keeping his eyes away from Sherlock’s pumpkin as he bent down to plant a kiss at the corner of the man’s forehead. “Here I am,” he affirmed, and Sherlock grinned.

“We can invite them if you want,” Sherlock said as John moved back to fetch the next bag. “I suppose you were thinking of the children.”

“I’m always thinking of the children,” John sighed, placing a pious hand to his chest in mocking, and Sherlock snorted. “Shut up, I’m a fucking saint!” he barked, and then had to dart across the room when Sherlock nearly stabbed himself as he laughed.

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“Close your eyes! All of you! You too, Kevin, I can see you peeking.”

“I wasn’t-”

“Please don’t try to lie to me, Kevin; we really don’t have the time.”

John bit his lip, covering his rising laughter with a fist as he ducked his head. When he looked up, Lestrade was giving him his patented control-this-person-you-unfathomably-chose-for-your-life-partner look, but John only shrugged, never having been capable of doing any such thing.

“Now, you stand here,” Sherlock was saying, tugging the boys this way and that as he arranged them at the optimum vantage point he had made John figure out with him earlier, Anne happily jumping around and circling them. “And you here. And, Emily, you come right here in the middle.”

The youngest Lestrade lingered at John’s side, pressing lightly against his leg as she half-hid behind it. “I don’t wanna close my eyes,” she whimpered through the cuff of her jumper, which protruded out from the fairy costume she was wearing.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, opening his mouth, but John silenced him with a much-practiced glare.

“If you don’t close your eyes,” he said, crouching down to be level with the girl, “then the lights coming on won’t be a surprise. You wanna be surprised, don’t you?”

Emily nodded, pouting into her sleeve as she peered up at him through downcast eyes. “Yes,” she muttered miserably, “but what if Uncle Sherlock walks me into a hole again?”

John sucked his lips in, avoiding a snort, but Lestrade, standing just behind him, did not quite succeed, and the heat of Sherlock’s glare singed across the air like lightning. “That was an accident,” John assured, raising his brows in entreaty at the girl. “And he fell in too, remember? Got his trousers all muddy?”

She giggled, and John winked at her as Sherlock sniffed somewhere to his right.

“I’d say it was worth it, wouldn’t you?” he asked, and Emily nodded, grinning now. “Come on,” John said, offering his arms across to her, and she stepped into them, wrapping her own around his neck as he hoisted her up to his hip, “I’ll go with you. I haven’t seen everything all set up either.”

“You haven’t?” Lestrade asked from where he and Molly were lingering with John on the doorstep, watching the spectacle.

John shook his head. “No, he wouldn’t let me. Locked me in the shed when I tried to help.”
“It was five minutes!” Sherlock spouted as Lestrade and Molly burst into laughter. “You were fine!”

“It was lucky I had a chocolate bar in my pocket,” he whispered conspiratorially to Emily, “or Uncle John would be one of those ghosts right now.” He nodded to the torn sheets Sherlock had hung from their porch, spinning and wafting in the breeze as the chemical something-or-other Sherlock had sprayed caught on the faint moonlight, glowing in an impressively eerie way.

Emily laughed, and Sherlock huffed, crossing his arms where he stood on the lawn.

“You have to close your eyes,” he snapped as John descended the stairs.

“What?” John spluttered as he reached the bottom, blinking in affront at the now smirking detective.

“Everyone else is closing their eyes,” Sherlock drawled, waving a hand back to where Kevin and Michael stood, hands clasped over their eyes, though one of Michael’s was occupied with petting Anne, who had happily tacked on at the end of their little line. “It’s only fair, really.”

John glared at him, but the man continued to look entirely innocent, holding out a hand for John to take. “Oh, for the love of—” he muttered, but closed his eyes, taking Sherlock’s hand with the one that wasn’t wrapped tightly around Emily, and then promptly yelped. “Your fingers are freezing!” he hissed, almost opening his eyes before Sherlock tutted at him in reminder. “I didn’t buy you those gloves to warm your wardrobe.”

“I forgot,” Sherlock answered, sounding genuinely contrite, so John let it go, but made sure his face still conveyed his disapproval. “Okay,” Sherlock said after a moment, turning John with gentle pressure on his shoulder. “Now, just a minute.”

“Sherlock!”

“I have to turn them on,” the man’s fading voice shouted back, and John grumbled, Emily shaking with a giggle in his arms.

“How much do you wanna bet he’s taking pictures of us right now?” John murmured out of the side of his mouth toward the boys, who tittered.

“Twenty bucks?” Kevin piped up, and John chuckled, certain that was a kid going places.

“Twenty bucks,” John agreed, nodding, though Kevin (probably) couldn’t see it, and then there was a rustle of footsteps.

“Okay, open!” Sherlock’s once-again-beside-him voice proclaimed, and John obeyed, blinking the scene into focus.

It wasn’t their house, he was sure of it. Sherlock had finally figured out teleportation—something John had been bothering him about for years—and had transported them to some sort of film set, because there was no possible way the man had managed to throw that together in a day and a half.

In addition to the ghosts on their porch, there were gravestones littered across the garden, something John had seen previously, but they looked different now, draped with moss and lit with the same fluorescent paint used on the ghosts. One of the names caught his attention, and he chuckled as he released Emily, who was wriggling in his arms wanting to get a closer look, racing off after her brothers and Anne as they all weaved through the makeshift cemetery.

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“Anderson?” he asked, nodding toward the headstone, and Sherlock smiled, shrugging.
John laughed, shaking his head as he took in the rest of the scene, which included massive cobwebs draped across their roof and trees, several pumpkins lit up with various faces in a path to their door, a surprisingly disturbing scarecrow staked in front of the shrubs beside their stairs, and several lights and fog effects that John couldn’t even pin down the exact origin of, they were interwoven so well.

All in all, it looked like they cooked children in heavy iron cauldrons for fun, and Sherlock looked thrilled.

“Well?” he asked, bouncing a little on his heels. “Whadya think? I would’ve liked to have added blood, but I wasn’t sure that was appropriate. The scarecrow moves every”—he paused as a sharp scream burst out in front of them, Molly leaping away from the reaching arm of the straw-stuffed creation before whirling on them with a glare—“minute and a half, though.”

John laughed, half at Sherlock, half at Molly snapping at Greg for laughing at her distress. “It’s amazing!” he exclaimed, shaking his head. “How did you manage it? I bought you batteries and tape!”

Sherlock shrugged, smiling broadly. “Ingenuity,” he said smugly, and John laughed again, roaming forward for closer examination.

Sherlock hung tight to his side, watching his every reaction with growing glee, and then, in front of the scarecrow—carefully timed for after its latest lunge—John stopped. Frowning, he leaned in close to the face of the scarecrow, a lit pumpkin that had been carved into a face, and, the more John looked at it, the more it looked like… “Is that Mycroft!?” he spluttered, and Sherlock nodded, positively beaming with pride.

“It took hours,” the man said, John hanging off his arm for support as he laughed, “but I think it’s a fairly good likeness, thinning hair and all. I even added a bit of extra stuffing,” he quipped, poking at the bulge beneath the scarecrow’s shirt.

“Oh my god!” John wheezed, gasping up at the figure. “Oh my god, that’s incredible! Did you send him a picture? We should send him a picture.”

Sherlock chuckled, but did pull out his mobile, snapping a few shots before they huddled over the screen, picking the best one and sending it off.

John looked back to the pumpkin, shaking his head in fond disbelief, and then stopped, leaning in closer to the light flickering through the neatly carved and shaved sections. “That’s not a real candle, is it?” he asked, eyeing the surrounding straw nervously, but Sherlock shook his head.

“LED,” he replied, and John nodded, moving back.

“Nice to see you’ve learned something from the Christmas tree debacle,” he muttered, grinning up at Sherlock’s sneer.

There was a sound from behind them, muffled voices and a distant laugh, and, from a ways off down the road, a parade of bobbing heads could be seen, the Halloween group closing in.

Sherlock burst into action, tugging John up the stairs and inside with Anne yipping excitedly at their heels. “Is the cider hot yet?” he muttered frantically, buzzing every direction around the living room. “And do we have enough sweets? We won’t win if we run out of sweets!”

“Sherlock!” John placed his hands on his partner’s shoulders, twisting Sherlock to look at him with panicked grey eyes. “It’s gonna be fine,” he urged, squeezing lightly for reassurance. “And, besides,” he added, shrugging as he let his hands drop away, “it’s not all about winning.”
Sherlock blinked at him, his face slowly pulling into a grimace. “What are you, a fortune cookie?” he spat, and John just laughed as the man rocketed away from him, tossing back Styrofoam cups. “Start filling these,” he commanded, the voices coming closer now through the door, and John just bowed his head, smiling into his task.

Hours later, exhausted and “Happy Halloween!”d out, they collapsed onto the sofa, too lazy to even turn on the television, and Anne appeared to share the sentiment, stretched out and twitching on the rug in front of the fire.

“I’ve never seen so many kids,” John breathed, shaking his head against the upholstery as Sherlock leaned his head atop his shoulder. “Even around town. I mean, did you know there were so many kids?”

Sherlock shook his head against John’s body. “Not a clue.”

“Where did they come from?” John asked up at the ceiling, still trapped in a horrified trance of witch after mummy after Harry Potter character. He was so distracted, he didn’t immediately notice Sherlock’s muscles tightening beside him, the man beginning to shake with faint laughter. “What?” John asked, nudging him with an arm as a smile grew on his own face, though he was not yet in on the joke. “What are you laughing at?”

Sherlock twisted his face up toward him, the glint of triumph in his eyes still holding far too much power, and it knocked John breathless as he blinked down at the man’s elated face. “Old Man Prentiss is so getting bumped to page two!” he trumpeted.

John stared at him a moment longer, the gears of his mind slowly clicking into place, and then he laughed, bowing his head to press his lips to Sherlock’s wild grin.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr! I’m kind of freaking out (prematurely, of course) about what to post for Halloween night, so if you have any SUPER festive ideas, please send them my way!
The Absence Of Fear

Chapter Summary

Prompt: John’s PTSD gets bad during October, with all the Halloween decorations that jump out at you and fake severed body parts everywhere, so Sherlock makes sure to stop bring home real body parts for a while and plays nice music at night to help with John’s nightmares. - anonymous

Sherlock sat on the sofa, eyes closed and ears alert, his foot tapping off the passing seconds in the air.

John was due to be home somewhere between 19 seconds and three minutes from now, depending on which train he’d caught, and Sherlock was impatient, a case waiting on the table in front of him for the man’s opinion. Not that Sherlock would ask for it, of course, but the file was sitting there, perfectly displayed so the words “Shoreditch Strangler” would catch John’s attention when he walked in the room, at which point the man would frown, head tilting slightly, and then point vaguely down toward the document and inquire about the new case. Sherlock would show him the picture of the strangulation marks at some point during his explanation, John would undoubtedly tell him if the bruising was more consistent with hands or some sort of rope or belt—Sherlock was leaning toward the latter—and then Sherlock would call Lestrade, slipping in ahead of the coroner yet again.

The door opened, and Sherlock threw himself down, leaning his head against the armrest and steepling his fingers beneath his chin, closing his eyes as he angled his chin up toward the ceiling. As the door closed, however, his eyes snapped back open, something not quite right in the sound of the wood and the click of the lock.

John’s footsteps were wrong too—too heavy, too fast—and Sherlock sat up as the man approached the top of the stairs, his eyes already on the spot where John’s face was about to appear.

John rose over the horizon of the floor, medical bag pulling down his left side, and his lips were set tight, a wrinkle between his brows. He looked tired, much more tired than a rotation at the clinic would normally cause, but a quick scan of his clothes revealed they hadn’t been changed, so no one had thrown up on him today. His shoulders were strung taut with tension, his neck stiff as he lifted it, but his best effort of a smile was genuine enough when he met Sherlock’s prying eyes.

“Hey,” he said, stepping into the room, temporarily depositing his bag on the floor against the wall. “You haven’t moved,” he added, eyes twinkling a bit over an almost-smirk, and then he turned away, heading toward the kitchen for his usual cup of tea. “You were sitting in that exact spot when I left this morning.”

“I got up,” Sherlock replied, and John’s chuckle drifted in from around the corner, where Sherlock could hear him opening up the cupboard and pulling down two mugs. “And I’m not wearing the same clothes.”

“I’m not sure different pajamas counts as a change of clothes.” The kettle clicked on, and footsteps crossed back toward him until John reached the doorjamb, where he stopped, leaning against the frame as he crossed his ankles and smiled across at Sherlock. It wasn’t quite right though, wasn’t quite normal, John’s lips pulled a little too thin, and a tension lingered around his eyes, tugging at his
winkles.

Sherlock searched over him again, but could see no immediate indication of what could be troubling him, no physical signs of any distress. So, mental then, something that had happened, some stressor John didn’t feel inclined to share. Would he answer if Sherlock asked? Was Sherlock supposed to ask? Or would it be better to simply allow John to confide or not confide on his own?

All of this happened in the space of a second, and, when Sherlock replied, it was entirely nonchalant.

“..." I was wearing one thing, and then I changed,” he muttered, and John’s smile grew a little more at ease. “That’s a change of clothes.”

“Technically,” John countered, and then rolled off the doorframe and back into the kitchen, drawers and fridges and spoons clinking and thumping as he prepared for tea.

Eventually, the water boiled, and there was a gurgle of filling cups before John reappeared, a mug for each hand. Mutely, he passed down Sherlock’s, and the detective took it, watching as John’s head tilted upon sighting the headline. “New case?” he inquired, but his fingers tightened on the handle of his mug, a corner of his mouth twitching as he averted his eyes to the coffee table instead of the pictures.

Slowly, casually, Sherlock leaned forward, shrugging as he moved to block the pages from John’s sight. “Nothing of import,” he muttered, folding the file shut with a quick flick of his fingers. “How was work?”

And John talked, bemoaning the recent flu panic as Sherlock simply watched him, trying to pin down exactly what had gone awry inside Doctor Watson.

Hours later, he got his first clue, albeit in the worst possible way.

He had been awoken by a shout, blinking in affright into the pre-dawn light as he scrabbled at his blankets, pushing them aside in preparation for a fight. No altercation came, however, and he frowned, searching around the room, and then his neck craned backward as his eyes shot to the ceiling, another strangled cry muffled through the floorboards.

John.

Sherlock bounded to the door, throwing it open with a bang, and was halfway up the stairs before he heard the footsteps, John’s door opening in a blur ahead of him. He froze, the safest reaction when someone was pointing a gun at you, but John quickly lowered his arms, sighing in relief.

“It’s you,” he panted, lifting a hand to his chest as he leaned against the doorframe, the safety clicking back into place with a flick of his thumb. “What did you do, knock over the fridge?”


“What?” John muttered, leaning back into his room to replace the gun in his bedside drawer before moving back out into the corridor. “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did,” Sherlock assured, moving up to the landing. “I heard you.”

John frowned, lips pulling together in a pout as he looked thoughtfully down toward the floor. “I-I don’t think-” He blinked, a thought clearly occurring to him, but his expression shuttered just as quickly, eyes icing over as his jaw stiffened, and it was then Sherlock noticed the faint sheen on his forehead, his blond hair ragged and damp where it met the skin. “I must’ve been talking in my sleep..."
or something,” he clipped, lifting his face to Sherlock’s, his expression entirely blank. “Sorry.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, planning to press, but something flashed across John’s eyes, a sort of pained pleading, and he just as quickly let it go, stepping back with a small nod. “It’s fine,” he assured with a small shrug. “About the time I was going to get up anyway.”

John chuckled, a little forced, but still an effort. “Sherlock, it’s gotta be, like, four in the morning.”

“4:17,” Sherlock replied, having glimpsed the clock on his way out of his room. “Lestrade wanted- wanted me there first thing in the morning to go over the case,” he added, leaving John out of it just this once, or at least giving him the opportunity.

John didn’t take it, however. “What am I, chopped liver?” he quipped, tilting his head with a quirk of his brows, and Sherlock ducked a smile to the ground. “I might as well go with you,” he muttered, shrugging as he turned back toward his room. “Don’t think I’ll be getting back to sleep, anyway,” he added as he moved out of Sherlock’s sight, and Sherlock frowned after him, puzzling over the morose bitterness in his tone for what would turn out to be hours.

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It took him three days to figure it out, and, in the end, it was practically cheating.

It was late, the tail end of twilight passing from purple to black above them, and they were heading home along a busy street, neon flickering from every direction.

“Why didn’t he kill the roommate, though,” Sherlock mused, hands in his pockets to ward off the autumn chill. “I mean, she could identify him. Why did he leave her?”

“She’d already called the police,” John supplied, shrugging at his side. “Maybe he figured he didn’t have time.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, it’s something else. What did she say he said to her? ‘I’m sorry…’ Laura? Lillian?”

“Sarah,” John supplied, turning his head up to him. “Where did you get Lillian from?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered, bristling as John chuckled. “Perhaps one of your previous girlfriends?”

John didn’t rise to the taunt, only shaking his head. “Never dated a Lillian. Or a Laura, for that matter. Which is a little weird, if you think about it; it’s a pretty common name.”

Sherlock glared down at where John was smiling straight ahead, clearly aware of exactly what he was doing. “Well, maybe I’ve become psychic;” Sherlock snapped, and John lifted an eyebrow up at him, “and the next girl you date will be Lillian or Laura.”

“Psychic, huh?” John replied, smirking. “And do you know how it will work out with this Lillian-or-Laura?”

“You mix her name up with her sister’s; it’s terribly awkward,” Sherlock bit back, and John was just turning to him, mouth opening in affront, when there was a sharp scream from behind them, and everything happened very, very fast.

Something tugged at Sherlock’s arm, flinging him sideways, and his breath left him in a startled wheeze as his back slammed against the brick of the building they’d been walking beside. He regained his footing, blinking dizzily to refocus after the whirl of light and color, and his eyes found
John was looking off to Sherlock’s right, eyes wide and frantic, and his right arm was pressed hard into Sherlock’s chest, holding him to the wall while the other hand was obscured in his pocket, clearly in the process of reaching for his gun.

Sherlock froze, not entirely sure what he was looking at, but in tune enough with his instincts to know he shouldn’t do anything too suddenly right now. “John?” he said softly, and the blond let out a small gasp, as if he’d forgotten Sherlock was there.

He snapped his head around, looking over Sherlock’s face, blinking like Sherlock were the one supposed to be telling him how they got there, and then he leaned back, arm peeling away from Sherlock’s body as his hand pulled free from his gun. “I- I’m sorry, I-”

The scream sounded again, and John jumped, hands lifting between him and the sound in an instinctive shield.

Sherlock frowned, puzzled, and then slowly leaned forward, following John’s eyes to the source of the sound.

They had been passing a party supply store, a display in the window lit up with glow-in-the-dark cobwebs and flashing strobe lights, and, in the center, there was a large coffin, the lid of which was just closing again as Sherlock watched, a mannequin of Dracula settling back inside.

Sherlock’s lips popped apart in understanding, and he turned back to his friend, lifting his hands consolingly. “John-” he started, but the blond cut him off with a bitter glare.

“Don’t,” he said, and a shudder ran down Sherlock’s spine at the words, colder than he had ever heard the man speak, and that included threatening murderers. “Just don’t.”

Sherlock stilled a moment, lips closing in hesitation, and then he took a small step forward, attempting it again. “It’s perfectly normal to-”

“Sherlock!”

Sherlock startled, one hand snapping back to brace himself against the wall as he stumbled.

John’s chest was heaving, his breath hissing furiously out of his nose, but his eyes weren’t angry so much as tortured, and Sherlock’s platitudes died on his tongue. “I don’t need your pity, alright?” he bit, teeth bared, and Sherlock blearily shook his head.

“I-I wasn’t-”

“DON’T!” John shouted, more desperate than angry, and Sherlock sank back against the wall. “I don’t wanna hear it, alright? So, can you please, for once, just…not?” He stared at Sherlock for a long moment that Sherlock didn’t dare breathe, and then he sighed, turning his face away. He closed his eyes, licking at his lips before biting over them, and then he took a steadying breath, lifting his head once more. “Are you alright?” he murmured, jaw set as he looked at the wall somewhere past Sherlock’s waist.

“I- What?” Sherlock stammered, and John snapped his eyes up to him, blue flashing with torment.

“Are you alright?” he repeatedly, growing earnest even as his tone remained stiff. “Did I hurt you?”

“What? No,” Sherlock urged, shaking his head emphatically. “No, you-you didn’t hurt me.”
John took a breath, the tension visibly unwinding from his body. “Okay,” he panted, nodding dazedly. “Okay…”

Sherlock tentatively stepped forward from the wall, approaching with careful footfalls. “John-” he began, but the man once again cut him off.

“Can we just-” he sputtered, lifting a hand between them as a shaky exhale rattled from him. “Can we just go home?” His eyes met Sherlock’s, world-worn and exhausted, and Sherlock immediately closed his mouth, nodding. John sighed in relief, blinking his gaze away as he turned. “Alright,” he clipped as he stepped further out onto the pavement, “let’s go,” and then he began to walk, Sherlock silently falling into stride beside him.

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They didn’t talk about it, but not for Sherlock’s lack of trying. To date, almost two weeks after the incident, he had tried to broach the subject four times, but John had shut down every single one, suddenly needing to make tea or collect the paper, or just fixing Sherlock with a look that suggested continuing to speak would be hazardous to his health.

It was difficult for him, to say the least, letting things go. He liked details, facts, information to surround himself with until he felt comfortable in the situation, but he had none of those things with John, and was mostly just scrambling to keep up. He’d done a bit of research into PTSD, even more than he’d done when he’d first met John, or after the kidnapping incident, or after he’d come back from the dead, or- Really, he was rather traumatic to be around, in the end, and so, in addition to helplessness in the face of the current predicament, he was also up to his elbows in guilt, which grew thicker and thicker in his throat with every night he had to awake John from a nightmare.

He was getting better at doing that, at least, never actually going into the room after that first time, John too ashamed to look at him for most of the next day even though he had no reason to be. Instead, Sherlock had taken to banging on things, stubbing his toe on his nightstand or knocking something over in the kitchen. He was going to have to order new beakers soon, he had broken so many of them, but it seemed to work, and John would be heard shifting under his blankets as he rolled over and slipped back into a peaceful sleep.

Other strategies were slightly trickier, and were being attempted one by one, their effectiveness tallied on a large spreadsheet Sherlock had codenamed “Tobacco Ash Categorization” on his laptop, a heading John was sure to never click on.

First up had been soothing sounds, which had started with Sherlock pretending to be doing an experiment on if those atmospheric tapes actually affected sleep. Of course, being that he didn’t sleep, it had been tasked to John to be the object of the study, which had ended rather abruptly about an hour into it when the man shattered the tape against his wall, cursing seagulls.

Part two of soothing sounds had been much more successful, however, and Sherlock had been playing his violin almost every night since, required to skip the odd one to avoid John becoming suspicious.

The other changes had been a bit more obvious, considering John’s reaction to the pictures of the strangulation victims Sherlock had made sense of in retrospect. He had temporarily halted his experiments involving body parts, instead moving on to the plant-based ones—something John seemed curious about, but not quite suspicious.

Mrs. Hudson had been slightly less than understanding about the kidneys in her freezer, but she’d calmed somewhat upon Sherlock’s stilted explanation of his reasoning, hindered by not wanting to
divulge anything John wouldn’t approve of. She seemed to have figured it out, however, patting him on the cheek with a dewy smile he didn’t entirely understand, but, so long as she also took in the feet that were due to arrive tomorrow, he wasn’t much bothered.

He’d been careful to steer them away from locations that might be loud or bright when they were on cases, and, when Lestrade called that evening with a—honestly quite promising—murder at a popular nightclub, Sherlock turned it down.

“It wouldn’t be worth the trip,” he muttered down into his mobile as he sat in his chair by the fire, watching John making tea in the kitchen. “I’m sure you can solve this one without me. It is supposed to be your job, after all.”

John smiled absentmindedly as he focused down on pouring milk into his cup, and Sherlock’s own lips tugged up at the sight, his ears missing the next few of Lestrade’s words as a result of the distraction.

“What? … No, I don’t have anything else. … Yes, I’m aware that- … So you’ve said. Look, Lestrade,” he snapped, pinching at the bridge of his nose before looking out into the fire, “you’ve called me in on the past three cases that have come across your desk. If I help you any more, you’ll forget how to perform your civic duty entirely.”

John barked a laugh in the kitchen, turning his face to smile briefly at Sherlock, who rolled his eyes to convey the unfathomable idiocy of mankind.

“Yes, yes, call me if you get irrevocably stuck in your own ineptitude. Goodnight.” He pulled the phone away from his ear, cutting off Lestrade’s blustering with a tap on the screen, and then sighed, letting his arm fall limply to his side as his head lolled over the back of the chair.

Footsteps padded across the floor toward him, John’s chuckle joining them as he drew up. “Better be careful, ya know,” he murmured, clinking Sherlock’s tea down on the table beside him. “He might actually stop calling you one of these days.”

Sherlock snorted. “Preposterous,” he snipped, rolling back up to take his mug as John laughed. “He wouldn’t last a week. He’ll be calling again before the end of the night.”

“Oh?” John murmured, swallowing down a sip. “Difficult case?”

Sherlock bobbed his head side-to-side. “Relatively. May take a few days.”

“So, you haven’t already solved it?” John asked, eyes turned down as he lifted his mug again.

“No,” Sherlock replied, shaking his head, “didn’t have enough information. So, what do you want to order? I was thinking Thai, but you keep hinting around that sushi place that just moved in down-”

John’s cup hit the table with a colossal crash, liquid slopping over the sides and pooling across the wood. “Why are you doing this!?” he exclaimed, suddenly up from his chair and glaring down at Sherlock, who was blinking, thoroughly nonplussed. “Why are you tiptoeing around me like a fucking child!?”

Sherlock shook his head, mouth agape. “I-I’m not-”

John scoffed, moving out to pace across the rug. “I’m not stupid, Sherlock! I might not be as clever as you, but I am not stupid!”

“I never said you were.” He stood, stepping out from his chair and moving toward the man. “What
Did you really think I wouldn’t notice!?” John bellowed, arms flinging out furiously at his sides. “You dropping things in the middle of the night, playing your violin, clearing out the fridge! You can actually put food in there, it’s so clean!”

Sherlock frowned, eyes shifting between John and the aforementioned appliance. “I- How is that bad?” he asked, eyebrows creasing. “You’ve been complaining about it since you moved in.”

“Yes!” John cried, as if, somehow, they’d reached a conclusion. “Exactly! And you never cleaned it!”

Sherlock blinked. “No, but I did now,” he said, waving a hand toward the kitchen, but John only snarled exasperatedly, turning away. “I don’t understand, why are you mad?” Sherlock shifted to the side, trying to force the man to look at him again, desperate for answers, for data, for something to make sense in this tangle of words and expressions he couldn’t read. “You wanted me to clean the fridge; why are you mad that I cleaned the fridge?”

“It’s not the fact that you cleaned the fridge, Sherlock,” John sighed, grinding his fingers into his temples.

“Then what!?” Sherlock bleated, helpless frustration rising in his chest. “What is it? What did I do?”

“I TOLD YOU NOT TO PITY ME!” John’s voice thundered in his ears, and Sherlock’s eyes widened as he stepped back at the sheer force of it. John’s hands were balled into fists at his sides, his arms shaking as he glared furiously. “I told you I didn’t want that! I told you to leave it alone!”

“What are you- I don’t pity you!” Sherlock argued, and John rattled his head, jaw twitching with a dangerous smile.

“What, then?” he mocked bitterly. “You just suddenly got clumsy with your beakers and tired of working cases?”

“No, I-” He stalled, mouth shifting in the silence.

“What, Sherlock?” John railed, eyes unyielding. “What!? If you don’t pity me, then-”

“It’s not pity!”

“THEN WHAT!?”

“I don’t-”

“SHERLOCK!”

“I JUST CARE!” Sherlock’s breasts were ragged, his chest heaving with a slew of long-dormant emotions he couldn’t even hope to think through, and John looked just as lost, the anger falling away in a blink from his stunned face. “Is that so hard to believe?” Sherlock continued, the words bubbling forth from the singeing star lodged at the base of his throat. “Is it so unfathomable that I could-”

“No,” John murmured, shaking his head as he tentatively reached out toward him. “No, Sherlock, I-”

“Because I can’t do that, can I?” He stepped away, swallowing hard through his closing throat, and John tipped his head at him, desperate and broken. “I can’t just care. I have to have some sort of motive, some kind of angle.”
“I never-”

“Do you know how much easier that would be?” Sherlock interrupted sharply, and John fell silent, closing his mouth as his hands fell to his sides. “How much safer? Do you have any idea how much I wish I really was just a machine?”

John flinched, but said nothing, his eyes blinking ashamedly down at the rug.

“But I can’t,” Sherlock half laughed, shaking his head. “I can’t, and I wish that I could, because maybe then it wouldn’t kill me every time you-” He faltered, brain finally alert enough to put the brakes on, but it had gone too far, John snapping his head up.

“Every time I what?” he asked, wobbly and breathless, and Sherlock couldn’t have moved if he’d tried, pinned as he was beneath those eyes.

“I- Nothing,” he muttered, dropping his gaze, but John’s footsteps were quick to cross the carpet toward him.

“Every time I what, Sherlock?” he pressed, and, as Sherlock tried to turn away, he reached out, gripping his bicep and holding him in place. “What!”?

“Leave.” The voice was not his, quiet and timid and frayed at the edges, and he ducked his head, looking anywhere but at John. “Every time you leave.”

John’s fingers slackened on his arm, but they remained, a warning against trying to flee, and, just as Sherlock was considering the likelihood of breaking his leg if he jumped out the window, warm fingers hooked beneath his chin, guiding his face gently forward.

John smiled softly up at him, eyes searching hesitantly between Sherlock’s as his fingers moved up to graze gingerly up his jaw. “You’re not a machine, Sherlock,” he whispered like an oath, like an irrefutable truth he could carve out in the stars, and, when it came to John Watson, Sherlock didn’t doubt it, “and I’m not leaving.” He tucked a curl behind Sherlock’s ear, his eyes watching the progress before looking back to Sherlock, who really ought to blink, but couldn’t for the life of him convey that to his eyes. John only smiled at his silence, hand drifting down to rest on Sherlock’s shoulder. “Not ever,” he added with a small shake of his head, and Sherlock’s knees vanished.

Off to the right, there was a sudden burst of sound, and they both turned, John’s hands sadly falling away from him.

“Take it,” John said as Sherlock looked back to him, nodding toward the ringing mobile with a smile, “or Lestrade will send the helicopters again.”

Sherlock huffed a laugh, still a bit dumbstruck, but he followed orders, moving across the room and grabbing up the phone. “Yes?” he rasped, and then cleared his throat, trying again and ignoring John chuckling behind his back. “Yes?” Lestrade began rambling in his ear, prattling on about strange markings and toxins, and Sherlock was just about to dismiss him when he turned, his eyes settling on John in the doorway to the stairwell.

He was already wearing his jacket, the outline of a gun visible in the pocket, and he held Sherlock’s coat and scarf in his hands, arms outstretched. He smirked as Sherlock’s eyes found his, bobbing the outerwear in beckoning as he nodded back behind him toward the stairs, and, slowly, a matching grin bloomed on Sherlock’s face.

“We’ll be right there,” he said, cutting off Lestrade’s pleading, and then slipped his mobile into his pocket, plucking his coat from John’s grasp as they barreled down the stairs.
Maladies and Pumpkin Pasties

Chapter Summary

_Prompt:_ Tease some Potterlock with a brisk Quidditch match or a trip to Hogsmeade? - toxicsemicolon

As a lot of you may already know, the next full-fledged fanfic I do is going to be a Potterlock, so I couldn't pass this one up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At first there was only sound, a shuffling followed by a clinking of metal, and then light began to move behind his eyelids, flickering away as he tried to chase it. He tried to speak, a faint sound grating from the back of his throat, and then he hissed loudly as pain smashed to the forefront of his conscious, pooling in his head and thumping with dull agony. With a groan, he blinked open his eyes, the room thankfully dim, but there was no mistaking the figure at the end of the bed, smirking down at him.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” John teased softly, tilting his head.

Sherlock chuckled, and then cut it off with a grab at his ribs. “Technically,” he croaked, pushing himself higher on the pillow as he swallowed, “we only _met_ like this once.”

John smiled, and then leaned forward, stretching over the book he had splayed at Sherlock’s feet. “How ya feelin’?” he asked, eyes roving concernedly over Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock leaned back against the pillow, tipping his face to the ceiling. “Remember when you made me try Firewhisky?” he rasped, and John nodded. “This is worse.”

John laughed as he closed his book, moving it aside as he shuffled up closer to Sherlock on the bed.

“What happened?” Sherlock asked, blinking around at what turned out to be the hospital wing, the white sheets and duvet soft and warm beneath his fingertips.

“Late hit with a bludger,” John muttered bitterly. “Got ya in the back of the head.”

“Moran?” Sherlock surmised, the Slytherin Beater clearly the most likely culprit, and, sure enough, John nodded.

“Right after you caught the snitch out from under Moriarty. Which you have _got_ to stop doing, by the way,” John scolded, wagging a finger down at him. “You let at least three chances go before you made a move. You don’t _always_ have to wait for it to be a show, ya know?”

“Just givin’ the people what they want,” Sherlock teased, shrugging, but John’s eyes only narrowed.

“I’m serious,” he urged, and shame sparked in Sherlock’s gut at the earnest in the boy’s blue eyes. “You’re gonna get yourself killed. Or give me a heart attack, whichever comes first.”
“You’re 17,” Sherlock scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Your heart is fine.”

John held him under a glare a moment longer, and then sniffed, looking pointedly away.

Sherlock let him stew a few seconds, and then shifted, pulling his attention back. “What happened to Moran?” he asked, and a flicker of a smile pulled at the corner of John’s mouth.

“Dunno,” he shrugged, idly twisting at Sherlock’s blanket. “He hasn’t turned back up yet.”

“Turned back- What did you do!?” Sherlock blustered, making to sit up, but John pushed him back down with a gentle pressure on his shoulder.

“It wasn’t me,” the blond assured, though he sounded almost disappointed. “Not this time, anyway. Irene hexed him or something. He was just…gone! And she says she won’t tell anyone where she sent him until you’re back to normal, so, if I were you, I’d milk it a few more days.” John winked down at him, and Sherlock smiled, knowing full well the ferocity of the Slytherin Chaser, in whom he had found an unlikely friend when he’d first come to Hogwarts, although he was fairly sure she had only started talking to him to cheat off his History of Magic homework.

“We did win, though, right?” Sherlock asked, shuffling up to sitting, the pillow cushioning his back against the metal headboard. “I-I don’t really remember…” He trailed away, lifting a hand to the back of his head as he frowned, but John quickly nodded.

“Yeah, you won. Another step closer to the Quidditch Cup,” he said cheerily, but Sherlock scoffed.

“We’re not gonna win,” he muttered, probing gingerly at the tender lump on his skull, something John immediately put a stop to, batting Sherlock’s hand away with a scowl and tut of his tongue. “Ravenclaw hasn’t won in over a decade. It’ll most certainly be you or Slytherin.”

“I dunno, with all that in-fighting they have right now?” John mused, lifting his eyebrows pointedly. “I’m not sure Slytherin’s in very good shape.”

“What about you though?” Sherlock pressed, and John grinned.

“I am in exceptional shape,” he mocked, tapping his fingers to his sternum, and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“You know what I mean,” he muttered, and John chuckled, nodding down at his legs.

“You know what I mean,” he answered, looking back up. He held Sherlock’s gaze a moment, smiling absentmindedly, and then tapped officially on the mattress, as if adjourning the conversation before shuffling to the edge and off Sherlock’s bed.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock blurted, leaning forward perhaps a bit too earnestly, but John only laughed, walking a short distance before bending to pick something up off a nearby chair.

“I thought, since you couldn’t go to the feast,” John replied, turning to place two heaping plates of food on the end of Sherlock’s bed, “I’d bring the feast to you.”

“The feast?” Sherlock questioned, blinking down at the spread, and it was only when his eyes caught on the black-and-orange-swirled lollipops that he remembered. “Halloween,” he murmured, looking up to John’s back where he was bent over the box again. “It’s Halloween.”

“Wow, you really do have a concussion,” John muttered, casting a smirk over his shoulder.
“I what?” Sherlock spluttered, groping at the back of his head again, and John laughed, moving to his side and gently pulling his hand away.

“You’re fine,” he assured, hand lingering on Sherlock’s forearm. “Took Mrs. Hudson all of five seconds to patch you up. You were kind of out of it for a bit, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just talking,” John answered, shrugging as he rummaged through the box once more. “Something about Molly wearing lipstick. And you mumbled something about my shampoo while I carried you up here.”

“I-“ Sherlock stammered, his core temperature spiking at least ten degrees. “You—You carried me?” he asked, leaving the business of his embarrassing admission for later, or, preferably, never.

John nodded, turning a curious look back to him. “Well, yeah. It’s not like you could walk.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to point out there had been other options—Mrs. Hudson’s floating stretchers, for example—but thought better of it, John’s easy reply something he’d rather cherish than poke holes in. There were bigger things to address anyway, as, from behind John’s turned back, several orange snakes of streamers came shooting up, twisting and trailing across the ceiling in enchanted swoops and spirals. “What are you—” he started, and then broke off, the question stalled by John’s soft smile as he turned.

“I told you,” the boy said, wand tapping at the small carved pumpkin in his hand, a light sparking inside as he placed it on the table at Sherlock’s bedside, “I’m bringing the feast to you.”

Sherlock smiled, hoping the light from the pumpkin lantern wasn’t quite enough to expose his blush. “Pass me a pumpkin pastie,” he muttered, nodding at the tray at his feet, and John laughed, but did pluck a warm pastry from the pile, handing it up to him before licking the lingering flakes off his tan fingers.

They ate in relative silence for a time, Sherlock leaning back on his pillow as John stretched out lengthwise at the base of the bed, the both of them watching the streamers streaking overhead in the flickering light. John got up to light a few candles at some point, sending them aloft with another flick of his wand, and they hovered above them now, casting a soft glow over the scene.

“How are you still here?” Sherlock asked quite suddenly as John got up to pack the remaining food away, the thought somehow just occurring to him. “Mrs. Hudson never lets visitors stay. And there’s no way she’d let you do all this.” He waved a hand up at the streamers in gesture, and one of them dove down, swatting his hand as if in a high-five. Snapping his hand back, he blinked in alarm as the orange strip snaked back up, and John just laughed, smiling up at his handiwork as he returned to the bed.

“I convinced her to make an exception,” he said, shrugging lightly as he draped himself up toward Sherlock on the duvet, propped up on his elbows with a book open below his head. “I’m really quite charming, you know,” he added, grinning when Sherlock snorted.

They lapsed back into silence then, John muttering to himself over his homework as Sherlock tried to read his textbook upside-down. That is, when he wasn’t watching the candlelight flicker in prisms through his blond hair.

Gradually, they shifted, Sherlock settling further back down into bed while John rolled onto his back,
lying beside Sherlock from atop the duvet. His head was level with Sherlock’s elbow where it ran along his side, and, sometimes, when the boy turned just right, his hair brushed against Sherlock’s skin, sending sparks shooting through his veins like those muggle fireworks John had taken him to over the summer.

“Expecto Patronum,” John murmured, face buried in the book on his chest as he flicked his wand aimlessly in the air, and an unfocused wisp of silver blue hazed out of the tip. “Expecto Patronum,” he repeated, a little bolder now, and then he lowered the book, lifting his wand aloft. “Expecto Patronum,” he said, casting the spell for real this time, and a mass of bright smoke swirled from the point of his wand, forming into a large Labrador Retriever that barked as it chased the orange streamers above them.

“Why are you still practicing that?” Sherlock asked, watching the well-known dog turn at the sound of his voice, ears perked and head tilting. “You’ve been able to do it since last year.”

“We’re reviewing them tomorrow,” John explained, watching as the dog bounded back toward them. “Professor Hindon wants to make sure we have all the Year 6 stuff down before we move on.”

Something bitter settled in Sherlock’s throat, but he was temporarily distracted as John’s patronus dove atop him, the dog licking at his face with a tongue that, though not wet, was still strangely cool. “Hey, stop!” he squawked, lifting an arm to block the creature as John cackled unhelpfully behind it. “JOHN!” he yelped, and there was a heavy sigh before the dog vanished in a swirl of fog, revealing a smirking John shaking his head at him. Sherlock glared, tugging primly at the collar of his Quidditch shirt. “Why does he always do that?” he snapped, and John chuckled, shrugging.

“I guess he likes you,” he replied, mockingly beaming.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Sherlock countered, sneering. “He’s not a real dog; he’s just your patronus.”

John’s smile faltered, a flicker of hurt passing over his features, but it was gone too quickly for Sherlock to comprehend it, and, a second later, John was once again smirking. “Well, I guess I like you, then,” he said, shrugging a shoulder, and Sherlock blinked, too stunned by the easy honesty to reply. “How’s yours coming along?” John asked, lowering himself back down to the bed, cradling his chin in his hands as he rested his chin on the limbs. “Why does he always do that?” he snapped, and John chuckled, shrugging.

“I- We haven’t started yet,” Sherlock replied, the thickness in his throat returning with a vengeance. “We’re still on the theory.”

John nodded, and then sniffed a brief laugh. “I don’t remember any of that,” he admitted, shaking his head a bit within his hands. “Hopefully there won’t be too much of it on the N.E.W.T.S.”

“Why are you even taking Defense Against the Dark Arts?” Sherlock asked, and John shifted, lowering himself even further, arms folding in front of him on the mattress as he rested his chin on the limbs. “You don’t need it to be a Healer, do you?”

“It’s recommended,” John replied, eyes moving to reflect the light of the pumpkin lantern at Sherlock’s right, “but I’d need it to be an Auror, and, I dunno”—he shrugged, blinking his eyes back to Sherlock—“I guess I wanna keep my options open.”

Sherlock nodded, though the idea was anything but agreeable.

John was a year above him, and in his last year at Hogwarts, whereas Sherlock was only a Sixth Year, trapped there for another cycle of pointless classes and tedious peers.
Alone. He was going to be alone.

“Hey.”

He snapped his head up, not having realized he had drifted away, but John was now sitting up, propped up by his palms in the mattress as he peered concernedly down at Sherlock.

“Are you alright?” he asked, frowning as he leaned down closer, and Sherlock, unable to have those blue eyes at such proximity at the moment, shifted away, waving a hand between them.


John eyed him skeptically, his brows slowly pushing together. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Is it your head? Do you feel dizzy? Confused? Quick.” He thrust a hand up beside his face, straightening three fingers. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“John, I’m fine,” Sherlock urged, rolling his eyes, and John slowly lowered his hand. “I’m just tired. I swear,” he added as John continued to peer at him through narrowed eyes. Stomach rolling, he hoisted up a smile, shifting as he made to turn onto his side, facing away from John. “You don’t have to stay,” he said, talking down at the pillow in front of him. “I’ll probably just fall right to sleep.”

“I-” John murmured, and Sherlock flinched, feeling the man’s arm stretching out to his shoulder in the shift of weight on the bed. He also felt John retract it, something sad creeping into the air around them. “Well, alright,” he said softly. “If- If you’re sure.”

“Yeah,” Sherlock clipped, and then winced, his voice a little higher than intended, but hopefully the slip would go unnoticed. “I’m sure,” he added, nodding pointedly enough for John to see the motion of his head.

Silence, and then a squeak, John’s weight lifting off the springs.

“Allright,” he said, and the room grew darker, the pumpkin lantern undoubtedly extinguished behind his back. “I-I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Sherlock replied, but he could feel John lingering, sense those blue eyes boring into the back of his neck.

“Sherlock-”

“I told you, I’m-”

“No, I- That’s not what I was gonna say.”

Sherlock fell silent, ears carefully attuned to the scrape of John’s jeans as he moved back to the bedside, hovering at the edge a moment before his weight once again settled behind Sherlock’s back.

“I- About-About me…leaving,” he began, and Sherlock’s stomach clenched in a rush of nausea, his fingers tightening on the duvet in front of him.

“What?” he sputtered with false incredulity. “What does you leaving have to do with anything? I don’t care that you’re leaving.”

A beat of silence, John’s deliberation broadcast clearly in the rising tension. “Well…I do,” he finally said, decided and determined, and Sherlock’s eyes widened into the dark, “and I’d appreciate it if you’d stop lying to me so this wasn’t super awkward.”
Slowly, the responsibility clearly shifted onto his shoulders now, Sherlock turned, peering up at John through his lashes as he rolled onto his back. “You… You care?” he mumbled, and John smiled, heartbreakingly fond.

“Of course I care,” he breathed, shaking his head as if Sherlock were the most foolish creature on the planet, even though he was always the one calling Sherlock brilliant. “You’re my best friend; I don’t wanna leave you. But you’ll have Mike. And- And Molly.” Something twisted at the smile on his face, pain temporarily frosting across his eyes. “Might even be better off without me around, actually,” he laughed, though there was little humor in it. “Always third-wheeling it on your dates.”

Sherlock blinked, lips popping apart in shock, but there was no grand reveal, no explosion of sparks and confetti to announce that he was being pranked. “My what?” he blurted, scrambling up to sitting once more, and John shifted back, eyes wide and startled. “You think- You think I’m dating Molly?”

John stared at him, mouth shifting soundlessly as he began to frown. “I- Yes,” he stammered, and Sherlock’s jaw dropped. “Wait, you’re- You’re not?”

“No!” Sherlock spluttered, shaking his head so hard it hurt. “No, of course not! Why would even think that?”

“Because you two are always together!” John trumpeted, hands waving in frantic gesticulations. “And you’re always…whispering!”

“Whispering!?” Sherlock parroted, unable to believe something this ridiculous was possible outside of those horrible movies John’s sister was so fond of. “What does whispering have to do with whether you’re dating someone?”

“I don’t know!” John blustered helplessly, rattling his head. “You’re just always sitting so- so close!”

Sherlock stared at him, head shaking in a daze, and then there was nothing to do but laugh, collapsing back onto the pillow and tossing his forearm over his eyes. “Oh my god,” he wheezed, shaking his head in the darkness. “Molly. You thought I was dating Molly.”

“Why is that so ridiculous?” John snapped over Sherlock’s laughter. “She’s nice. And pretty. There’s no reason you-” Finally—finally—he stopped, blinking down at Sherlock, who dipped his head slightly in acknowledgement. “Oh,” the blond breathed, eyes shifting to dart aimlessly around in the dark.

“Yeah,” Sherlock muttered, scratching at his neck as he looked down at the blanket.

John simply breathed a moment, lips twitching, and then he whirled back to Sherlock. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, something like anger slipping into his tone, and Sherlock recoiled, perplexed.

“I-I thought it would bother you,” he murmured, and John’s mouth dropped open in affront.

“Bother me?” he spat. “You-You thought it would bother me? Sherlock, you’re my friend! Do you really think I would care if you were gay? Do you really think that little of me?”
“No!” Sherlock blurted, hand shooting out in plea. “No, I-I just- I thought you’d be… uncomfortable.”

“Why?” John scoffed, shaking his head, oblivious to Sherlock’s growing panic, his stomach tangling as his fingers twisted anxiously into the duvet. “I mean, it’s not like you’re attracted to me!”

Sherlock winced, biting his lip as his eyes pinched shut, shoulders hunching against the straining silence.

“Sherlock?” John pressed, the word wobbling out of his mouth, but Sherlock did not look up, did not even move except to curl his shoulders up even higher in a faint psychological shield. “You’re— You’re not… are you?”

Sherlock’s feet twisted together under the blankets, his head turning away as John moved further up the bed.

“Sherlock!”

“No!” he spouted, meeting John’s eyes for the scantest second he could manage. “No, of—of course not. That’s— No!”

“Sherlock,” John said, moving up farther still, his voice quick and ragged, “don’t lie to me. Not right now, not about this.”

“I-I’m not.—”

“Sherlock.”

He looked up, meeting John’s steady gaze, which didn’t look nearly as furious as Sherlock had been expecting.

“I need you to tell me,” he said, soft but stern, just an edge of Gryffindor-prefect-voice slipping in around the tender tone. “Are you- Do you-” He faltered, eyes blinking away with a jagged sigh before he looked expectantly back to Sherlock again, something barely restrained behind his irises.

Sherlock opened his mouth, expecting to lie again, to look straight back into John’s eyes and tell him it had all been some sort of miscommunication, but, when he spoke, all that came out was a wrecked, “I’m sorry.”

John blinked, head snapping back on his neck in shock, and Sherlock shook his head, panic gripping cold and unrelenting on his heart.

“John, I– I never– I didn’t—” he choked, voice shamefully watery, and he was just looking away, ducking his head in shame down to the bed between them when firm fingers caught his chin, pulling him forward again. There was just enough time to blink, to reassure himself that he was not, in fact, hallucinating before John’s lips pressed to his, startling a gasp from his mouth.

It was a tentative touch, John barely moving at all against him, and then he was pulling away, fingers trailing off Sherlock’s chin as he smiled softly, stopping just far enough away to be in focus.

Sherlock, for his part, hadn’t moved at all, his lips still drawn into a pout as he blinked at John, the situation so surreal, he could almost believe he’d imagined it if not for the fact that his heart was trying to crack his ribs.

“Don’t be sorry,” John whispered, hand hovering beside Sherlock’s face a moment, the presence
casting a palpable heat over his cheek before John dropped his arm. John gently shook his head, eyes scanning down to Sherlock’s chest a moment. “Don’t ever be sorry,” he added in a breath, and something snapped in Sherlock, a heavily fortified wall of fear he hadn’t even realized he’d installed until it was crumbling, bricks collapsing to dust as he leaned forward, clumsily pressing his lips to John’s again.

He had no idea what he was doing, but John was quick on the uptake, and promptly lifted a hand to Sherlock’s neck, tilting him slightly so the angle was less awkward. There was still no finesse to it, no swelling instrumental soundtrack, and they both tasted like pumpkin everything, but, as John slid his hands through Sherlock’s hair, catching Sherlock’s lower lip between his own, Sherlock couldn’t imagine anything more perfect. That was, of course, before John’s hand brushed the bruise on his head, and he drew back with a snap, hissing involuntarily.

“Oh, god, I’m sorry!” John spluttered, one hand reaching out toward Sherlock’s shoulder, though not quite touching as the other lifted to his mouth in horror. “Are you alright? *Fuck!* I’m sorry, I-I completely forgot!”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock assured, waving a hand at him as he steadied himself on an elbow, his opposite arm bent back to brush fingertips over the wound. “I did too.”

John chuckled, biting his lip sheepishly as he dropped his face to the duvet. “I guess we should probably wait until you don’t have a head injury,” he said, and Sherlock smiled, huffing a small laugh.

“Probably,” he agreed, drawing his hand away from his head, and then looked up at John, frowning with wary thought. “So, you do- I mean, you want- You want?” he finished lamely, stomach sinking in chagrin, but John only laughed.

“Yeah,” he said, shuffling up on the bed as he pushed Sherlock lightly on the shoulder, ushering him aside, “I want.”

Sherlock shifted to the edge of the pillow, John settling in beside him, although still atop the blankets. “You could-” he began, but John cut him off, shaking his head against the fabric.

“No,” he said, right arm stretching across the space between them as he brushed a wayward curl from Sherlock’s forehead, and Sherlock almost didn’t hear his next words through all the angels singing, “I think Mrs. Hudson would have a heart attack if she came back in to that.”

Sherlock chuckled, ducking his head into the fistful of blankets at his chin, and, as he blinked, he realized just how tired he was, how heavy the weight had grown on his eyelids.

“Just go to sleep,” John whispered, fingertips tickling trails down from Sherlock’s forehead. “I’ll be here in the morning.”

And that, as it turned out, was exactly what Sherlock needed to hear, the darkness overtaking him the second the words passed John’s lips.

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“Aww, do we really have to wake them?”

Sherlock eyes shifted behind their lids, his ears narrowing down on the voices he could hear coming from somewhere above him.

“They’ll be late if we don’t,” another female voice replied, the words snapping with impatience, and
Sherlock was fairly certain who *that* one belonged to.

“But they look so cute!” the first girl pleaded, and Sherlock could practically hear Irene rolling her eyes.

“Thanks,” said a voice much closer, and Sherlock’s eyes snapped open as he heard the two girls gasp, John’s smirking face coming into focus in front of him. “I mean, we already knew that,” he added, tilting his head up at Molly, “but it’s always nice to be reminded.” He then turned his face to Sherlock, smiling across the inches between them on the pillow. “Morning,” he chirped, smiling smugly, and Irene made a retching sound.

Sherlock rolled his head back, looking up at her where she stood hovering at his side, her eyes casting between them with disgust.

“You two,” she muttered, lip curling. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you finally got your act together—”

“Irene,” Molly chided, glaring at her from the opposite side of the bed.

“But could you keep that soppy nonsense to yourselves? I haven’t been down to breakfast yet, and I’d like to still be able to eat it.”

Sherlock blushed, trying to subtly bury his face back into the blanket, but John simply laughed, sitting up as he rubbed pointlessly at his vertically-inclined hair.

“Breakfast is still up?” he asked, and Molly nodded while Irene rolled her eyes.

“I just said that, didn’t I?” she snapped, and John lifted a brow at her before turning to Sherlock with his usual ‘Why do we like her, again?’ expression.

Sherlock chuckled, pushing the duvet down from his face, John’s confidence apparently contagious. “We’ll be right down,” he said, turning his head briefly to yawn. “I just have to run up to the tower and get clothes.”

“Oh, no, I brought you some,” Molly interjected, waving a hand behind her to the chair, a fresh uniform sitting atop the cushion. “Figured you wouldn’t wanna wear your Quidditch things all day,” she added with a shy shrug, and Sherlock smiled up at her.

“Thank you,” he said without thinking, and she started, eyes blinking wide at him.

“Oh, *god*!” Irene groaned, rolling her head exasperatedly to the ceiling. “He’s already rubbing off on you! Actually, forget I said that; it’s a visual I don’t really need.”

“Irene!?” Sherlock spluttered, fairly sure his entire body just changed color, but then John laughed, loud and bright, and Sherlock wondered if it always sounded like that, like no one had ever been so happy in all the world.

“We’ll meet you down there,” John called after them as Irene grabbed a still-stunned Molly by the arm and marched her toward the door. It swung shut behind them with a thud, and John chuckled, shaking his head at the closed entrance before turning once again to Sherlock. “Guess we should go,” he murmured, smile soft as he looked over Sherlock’s face.

The sun was streaking in from the window behind him, catching on his hair in a halo around his tanned face. His eyes were still dewy from sleep, pillow creases snaking in red streaks across his cheek, and his clothes were a disaster, grey shirt pinched and bunched perhaps beyond repair. He
was wrinkled and ragged and still smelt faintly of pumpkin juice, and Sherlock had never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life.

“We have time,” he murmured, stretching his hand out from beneath the blankets to loosely tangle their fingertips.

John looked down at the touch, lips parting in surprise a moment, and then he smiled, lifting his brightening eyes as he laced their fingers fully. “Yeah,” he breathed, shifting back down to slide his words across Sherlock’s lips. “Yeah, we do.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
Prompt: Kid!lock. Sherlock and Redbeard meet John and Gladstone at the park. Reluctantly, Sherlock lets them join his pirate crew. Puppy love. Sherlock has a big crush on John and continually calls him wench. Redbeard and Gladstone are dog besties. - anonymous

I know this one's late, but there will be another one later today to catch up!

“Avast, ye scurvy- Redbeard!”

The dog ripped the stick from Sherlock’s hand, apparently unhindered by the fact that it was meant to be a sword as he lay down on the grass nearby, gnawing the wood to splinters.

Sherlock moved to stand atop a rock, hands on his hips as he glared down at the dog over the shrubs that framed the edges of the park, a groomed green ring before the woods overwhelmed. “You are the worst first mate ever!” he snarled, stamping his foot, but the dog paid him no heed, continuing to grind his teeth into Sherlock’s makeshift blade.

“Hi.”

Sherlock startled, moving to step back as he turned toward the voice, and then promptly lost his balance, toppling backward into the dirt.

“Sorry!” A boy burst through the bushes, moving quickly to Sherlock’s side as he peered concernedly down at him. “Are you alright?”

Sherlock turned, the movement crunching at the leaves beneath his head, but the sun was shining directly behind the boy’s head, and he lifted a hand, squinting into the light.

“Oh, sorry,” the boy muttered, and then shifted slightly, casting Sherlock into shadow so he could look at him properly.

The boy looked to be about Sherlock’s age, perhaps a little older, and his jeans were worn and dirty, as well as being at least a size too big for him. He was wearing a large royal blue jumper, holes worn in the cuffs where his thumbs protruded, and his trainers were splattered with mud, a sure sign their owner spent a lot of time outdoors, perhaps playing sports. As for the boy himself, his blond hair was tousled by the wind, a leaf stuck in it from when he’d pushed through the shrubs to Sherlock, and he was smiling brightly down at him, blue eyes twinkling with an amusement Sherlock found rather offensive.

“Are you okay?” he asked again, his eyes moving down Sherlock’s body before returning to his face. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me,” Sherlock snapped, ignoring the boy’s offered hand as he pushed himself up to standing, brushing dirt off the back of his trousers.

The boy grinned at him, clearly skeptical, but did not reply, instead turning away to nod back the
way he had appeared. “Your mum sent me,” he said, and Sherlock frowned. “Said you were playing over here.”

“How do you know my mum?” he asked, and the blond shrugged.

“I don’t really, my mum does. I guess we go to the same school. I’m in the year above you though.” He smiled, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes, age hardly something to feel so smug about, in his opinion. “I’m John,” he said, lifting his hand in a small introductory wave at his shoulder. “John Watson. You’re Sherlock, right?”

Sherlock blinked, his brows quickly drawing together in a frown.

“I’ve seen you at school,” John explained, shoulders lifting as he slid his hands into his pockets. “You always sit under that tree on the playground.”

“But how do you know my name?” Sherlock pressed, and John shrugged, kicking at a stone with the toe of his shoe.

“I asked,” he replied, and Sherlock, though still suspicious, supposed that was acceptable. “Are you playing pirates?” John asked suddenly, eyes brightening as he lifted his face again. “I heard you when I was walking over. ‘Avast ye’ something or other.”

“Scurvy dog,” Sherlock explained, growing less and less sure about this John person if he didn’t even know that staple of pirate vernacular. “I was playing with Redbeard,” he added pointedly, but John didn’t seem to take the hint he wasn’t invited, and lingered, tilting his head with a confused pout.

“Redbeard?” he asked, and Sherlock, temporarily accepting the affliction of company, rolled his eyes and stepped away, pushing aside the branches and waving in gesture to the dog.

“Oh, your dog’s name is Redbeard?” John asked, and Sherlock nodded. “Mine’s Gladstone,” he said, and Sherlock snapped his eyes to him, perplexed before he followed his gaze, finding the grey bulldog currently sniffing at Redbeard’s nose.

Sherlock glared down at the two dogs, betrayal burning in his gut, and he slowly turned a glower at John as the boy began to laugh.

“Looks like he likes him,” the blond chuckled, watching as Redbeard stood, bowing his head and front paws to the ground before jumping up, bouncing in circles around the much older bulldog.

Sherlock did not reply, merely watching the display, though he did feel a strange kinship with the bulldog, watching the playfully growling Redbeard with impressive apathy as he was.

“So, do you wanna play?” John asked, and Sherlock turned to him, eyebrow rising. The blond beamed at him, bobbing his head back to the shrubs they had emerged from. “Pirates,” he clarified. “I can play with you. I can be your first mate or something!”

“Redbeard’s my first mate,” Sherlock snipped, trying to keep his expression dignified even as his disappointment of a dog rolled around on the ground, tongue hanging out as he panted.

“Well, then I can be something else,” John shrugged, undeterred. “That guy who yells ‘Land ho!’ or something.”

“We don’t need anyone else.” Sherlock turned his back, moving toward his hollow once again. “Redbeard and I always play by ourselves.”
“Why?”

Sherlock stopped, blinking out into the woods, and then his face dropped to the ground as he thought. “I- What?” he stammered, turning to John over his shoulder.

The blond’s expression was soft, eyes curious as he moved to Sherlock’s side, tilting his head. “Why do you always play alone?”

“I-” Sherlock opened and closed his mouth, blinking dumbly back at the boy. “I don’t know,” he admitted in a murmur, dropping his face to the grass as he twisted his toe into the dirt. “Nobody else ever wants to.”

John’s trainers moved into his eye line as the boy stepped closer, and Sherlock lifted his chin to find a bright smile shining down on him. “Well, I want to,” he said, as if it were that simple, as if it were not the first time anyone had ever said such a thing about Sherlock Holmes in all his short life. “So, what were you doing?”

“I-” Sherlock murmured, looking back to his lonely rock, and then a small smile tugged at his lips. “We were just about to fight the Kraken.”

“The Kraken?” John asked, and Sherlock hooked tentative fingers into the boy’s jumper, guiding him back under cover of the shrubs.

“There,” he whispered, pointing through the leaves to where a figure sat underneath a tree some distance away, his face bowed into a book.

“That’s not a Kraken,” John scoffed, and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“Obviously,” he snapped, not even John above being an idiot, apparently, but he did smell nice—like chocolate biscuits and the breeze that whips through just before a storm—and at least he knew what a Kraken was, so Sherlock supposed he could stay for the moment. “The Kraken lives in the ocean; everyone knows that. That’s my brother, Mycroft.”

“Your brother?” John questioned, dropping his voice to a whisper as he leaned in toward Sherlock, their faces tight together behind their organic barricade. “Why would you wanna attack your brother?”

“He messed up my experiment,” Sherlock replied, the horror of that morning still fresh in his mind. “I was studying the habits of bees as the weather gets colder, and he knocked down the hive in our garden.”

“Really?” John asked, eyebrows rising, and Sherlock nodded, glad to finally have someone reacting appropriately to the tragedy. “What are you gonna do?”

Sherlock turned back, waving John to follow as he moved further into his stronghold. “Cannonballs,” he said, smirking proudly as he gestured down to the pile on conkers he’d collected, and John, after a moment, grinned.

“What’s the plan?” he asked, and Sherlock briefly explained the fairly simple maneuver of flinging the seeds from the high ground of the rocks as he handed John his half of the ammunition.

“Alright,” Sherlock whispered as they crouched into their positions, ready to pop up and begin the assault. “Ready, wench?”

“Wench!?” John spluttered, mouth dropping open, but Sherlock only shrugged.
“I told you, Redbeard’s my first mate.”

“Well, yeah, but he’s-”

“Are you ready or not?”

John grumbled, scowling at him, but nodded, and Sherlock stretched his neck up, checking Mycroft’s position.

“Ready…aim…FIRE!” he shouted, and they jumped up, laughing raucously as Mycroft’s shrill shout echoed through the park.
“You know,” John said, leaning forward to dip one of the chips into the small dish of ketchup before bracing himself back against the windshield, “this might be the best idea I’ve ever had.”

Sherlock smiled, turning his head slightly where it pressed against his arms, which were folded behind him, supporting his skull off the glass as he lay stretched down the hood of John’s car. “Ever?” he asked, and John looked to him, smiling as he shrugged.

“I mean, that chemistry test thing was good, but, yeah, this one might be better.”

“Leaving a party early is better than toxic fumes?” Sherlock questioned skeptically, and John laughed.

“It was a horrible party,” John said, tipping his head to him, “to be fair. Who ever heard of a ‘Harvest Party’ anyway? It’s Halloween or it’s not, ya know?” He shook his head up at the stars, and Sherlock smiled at the side of his face, amused at the fervor of his frustration. “I mean, I love Molly, don’t get me wrong, but her parents are mad! And those fumes weren’t toxic.” He sat up, grabbing another handful of chips. “You know that; you helped me set it up.”

Sherlock nodded up at the dark sky, smiling absentmindedly at the memory. “You could have just studied for the test, you know,” he chided, turning his eyes to John, who sneered at Sherlock’s smirk. “I forgot,” John reminded, flopping back down, his trainers shifting against the dark green metal of the car’s hood, “and I had a rugby game the night before. And it was your idea to get the test postponed in the first place.”

“I forgot,” John reminded, flopping back down, his trainers shifting against the dark green metal of the car’s hood, “and I had a rugby game the night before. And it was your idea to get the test postponed in the first place.”

“Was it?” Sherlock muttered, his brow furrowing in honest confusion, and John nodded back.

“Yes!” he chirped, popping a chip in his mouth. “You said we could pull the fire alarm, I said that was illegal, and you said: ‘Not if there’s a fire’. John flicked his eyebrows pointedly, and Sherlock laughed, his arms unfolding as he took his turn reaching into the bag of chips, now nearly transparent with grease.

“That’s right,” he chuckled, opening one of the malt vinegar packets and carefully dotting along the fried surface. “So, really, it was my good idea.”

John scoffed, but then smiled at him, and they lapsed back into silence as they lay spread across John’s car, staring up at the sky.

Molly lived on the fringes of London, her family owning a rather large plot of land in the country. It had seemed the perfect setting for a party, but, when they got there, it was all bobbing for apples and ghost-shaped rice cereal treats, and it had only been an hour before Sherlock had surreptitiously sent...
John, a text from across the room, asking if he could conjure up a medical emergency.

If anyone asked, John’s aunt had just been rushed into surgery on her gallbladder, but, if no one asked, they were pulled over at the top of some middle-of-nowhere hill, the stars twinkling through the gaps in the clouds above them while the lights of London glowed in the distance.

“Do you think Molly will be upset?” John asked, his face frowning when Sherlock turned to look at it. “There were other people there. I mean, we didn’t leave her alone.”

“Did you see her?” Sherlock urged, and John looked to him curiously. “She wanted the earth to open up and swallow her!”

John laughed, his head bobbing off the windshield a moment as he bent up with mirth.

“Seriously!” Sherlock insisted, because John didn’t seem to be taking him as such. “She didn’t even want to be there! I’m sure she can’t wait for everyone to leave so she go crawl into bed and forget the whole thing ever happened.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” John said, as if he hadn’t been just as eager to leave as Sherlock. “I’ve been to worse.”

“Since you turned ten?” Sherlock scoffed, and John laughed.

“Well, no,” he chuckled, shaking his head, “I guess not. Still, I feel bad for her.” He eased back down to the windshield, one arm bending back to cradle his head. “It’s not her fault her parents moved their vacation.”

“She could have moved the party,” Sherlock muttered, and John reached across the small space between them to swat him on the arm.

“Well, at least it’s half-term,” he sighed up at the sky. “Plenty of time for everyone to forget about it before school starts up again.”

Sherlock nodded, the short memories of their peers having certainly served him well in the past. With the topic of school being brought up, however, a now familiar feeling wriggled in Sherlock’s gut, and he looked to his lap, twisting his fingers. “Did you- Are you applying to universities yet?” he asked, and, from the corner of his eye, John nodded.

“Yeah, I started. Not sure how many I’ll get into, but I’m applying all over the place.”

“All over?” Sherlock inquired, turning a little more purposefully now as John nodded again.


“Edinburgh?” Sherlock spluttered, sitting up with a start, and John snapped his head to him, eyes widening in the dim. “As in Scotland? Edinburgh, Scotland?”

John blinked at him, slowly moving to sitting on the green hood. “Yes,” he drawled, tilting his head with a frown. “Is there- Is there any other Edinburgh?”

“You want to go to Scotland!” Sherlock spouted, his head spinning oddly, like the world was rolling under him, or perhaps just falling apart.

“I- Well, there are other places I’d prefer, but-”

“But you’d go to Scotland,” Sherlock surmised, and John, after a moment of looking at him
pleadingly, closed his mouth and dropped his head.

“I- It’s a good school, Sherlock,” he said softly as he peered back up. “And they have a great scholarship program. You know I couldn’t afford medical school on my own.”

“I told you, I would-”

“I’m not taking your money, Sherlock,” John interrupted, sighing exasperatedly, the argument old and worn out between them. “Look, Edinburgh isn’t my first choice, alright? Of course I’d rather stay in London, but- Well, I have to have a plan.”

“We had a plan,” Sherlock countered, and John looked away, shaking his head out to the city below. “You were going to go to Barts and stay at Baker Street with me. Did I have that conversation with myself, or-”

“And what if I don’t get into Barts?” John clipped, shrugging sharply as he turned back.

Sherlock’s mouth faltered, locked open a moment before it moved into words. “Then you work. Apply again in the winter. We talked about this!”

“But what if it doesn’t work out?” John continued, face impassive, eyes cold and hard, nothing John Watson about him at all. “What if I can’t get a job, or Barts rejects me again, or Baker Street falls through-”

“What are you talking about? Baker Street isn’t going to ‘fall through’! I already live there!” Sherlock spluttered, half laughing at the absurdity as he touched a hand to his chest. “There’s nothing to fall through; you just have to move in.”

“What if that doesn’t happen, though?”

Sherlock blinked, his frustration stripped down to hurt as he stared back at John’s icy eyes. John’s jaw was set, a small crease wrinkling at the skin between his brows, but, apart from that, he looked entirely unaffected by the conversation. “What if something happens? Something goes wrong and you don’t want me living with you anymore?”

Sherlock’s eyes popped, his jaw dropping. “That would never-”

“You can’t know that,” John muttered, shaking his head as he looked forward once again. “Not for sure. And this isn’t… daydreaming over takeaway and James Bond marathons anymore, Sherlock; this is real life.” He blinked out at the cityscape, head dipping a moment before he looked to Sherlock, his eyes empty as they hollowed Sherlock out. “I can’t plan it around a ‘maybe’.”

Sherlock stared at him, unable to believe what he was hearing. This was John! They had been best friends for years, the time before something Sherlock had willfully forgotten. They were always a team, always. A pair, a plural, a set. Nobody even asked if one of them was going somewhere anymore, they asked if ‘Sherlock and John’ were coming, are ‘John and Sherlock’ going to be there. And the fact that John thought, that John would even consider…

“A maybe?” Sherlock rasped, and John winced, turning to look over the edge of the car. “You think- Why would you think that?” He shook his head at the back of John’s, his chest physically aching. “Do you- Do you not trust me?”

“I trust you,” John replied, though he spoke to the ground, and Sherlock lifted a hand, considering grabbing at his shoulder, but deciding against it, his hand lowering back to his lap.
“Then why-”

“Things change, Sherlock.” John slowly looked back to him, what had been a cold mask now broken and vulnerable. “People change. They get bored, they… They leave.”

Sherlock watched as he turned away, blue eyes reflecting the city lights in scattered whites and yellows, and his heart sank, heavy with realization.

John didn’t talk much about his father, and, when he did, it was always in as few words as possible, racing through the sparse story until he could make a joke and move on. Sherlock knew the man had left them, left John’s mother and himself and his sister to move in with their aunt in the city, and he knew John’s mother had never been quite the same, her eyes always bloodshot and breath always tainted. That sort of things leaves scars, jagged ghosts that stretch out much farther than the bearer realizes, and Sherlock had watched it play out over the years, watched relationship after relationship fall apart in John’s hands, where he broke it himself, frightened fingers severing ties whenever they got too tight.

Sherlock had just never dreamt he would be one of them.

He opened his mouth, no idea what was about to come about, but he was temporarily spared as rain began to fall, the premiere droplets pinging heavily off the metal.

They didn’t move at first, both looking up to the sky, and then the clouds burst open, rain pouring down so heavy and hard, Sherlock thought he might have been able to swim through it. They scrambled, blindly grabbing at their food and belongings as they hastened back into the car, and the doors slammed shut in near perfect tandem as they closed themselves inside, breathing heavily beside one another in the dark. Wordlessly, they leaned forward, tilting their heads to peer up at the wall of water cascading down the windshield, and then they turned toward one another, a mute agreement in the meeting of their eyes.

John started the car, and Sherlock settled back in his seat, swatting at the water in his hair as John twisted around, beginning to back up. They got some ways down the narrow trail they’d used to get out here when the car abruptly lurched to a stop, Sherlock’s head bobbing against the headrest.

“What happened?” he asked, somewhat stupidly, but John didn’t appear to notice, frowning down at the pedals as he tapped, revving the engine again and again.

“I think we’re stuck,” he murmured, flipping the car into park before fumbling with his seatbelt.

“Stuck?” Sherlock parroted, looking around at the rain-streaked windows, but his attention was drawn back with a start as John opened his door. “What are you doing!?” he cried, giving John’s arm a sharp tug, and the boy turned back to him, door almost closing as he leaned back in.

“Out there!?” Sherlock blustered, pointing at the roof, where the rain was beating down so hard, it seemed a miracle it wasn’t caving in. “Are you insane!?”

“Well, somebody’s gotta check, and, if it’s not that bad, I might be able to dig us out.” He moved again, breaking free of Sherlock’s grip as he turned once again to the door.

“But, John!”

“Just stay here,” John ordered, looking over his shoulder as he made to lunge out. “And run if you see a guy with a hook for a hand.”
“John!” Sherlock squawked, that joke so not funny right now, but the man was gone, ignoring him as he burst headlong out into the night, slamming the door behind him. Sherlock rattled his buckle free, scrabbling around to his knees on the seat as he peered out the back windows, trying to catch a glimpse of John through the gloom.

Shadows moved here and there, but it was impossible to tell what was John and what was just a trick of the green lights of the console streaking through the rain on the windows, so, when the door opened again, Sherlock jumped with a small yelp.

John was drenched, mud up to his knees, but he spared a moment to raise a mocking eyebrow at Sherlock before dropping back into his seat, the door banging shut behind him. “Well, we’re stuck,” he announced, shaking his head like a dog, and Sherlock flinched away from the spray. “I called a tow truck, but they’ll take ages in this weather. But, we have a full tank of petrol,” he chirped almost cheerfully, twisting the temperature dial to full heat, “and that whole other bag of chips we left in the back, so it shouldn’t be that bad. Are you cold?” He turned to Sherlock, who couldn’t do anything but blink back at his curious expression a moment, all that information uttered too rapidly to process promptly.

“I- No, not-not really,” he murmured, and then jumped back as John stretched toward him, his heart already pounding erratically before his brain could tell him why.

John stopped, tilting his head at Sherlock’s wide-eyed panic, and then continued his reach into the backseat, watching him sidelong all the while. “Are you alright?” he asked, retrieving a blanket, and Sherlock nearly laughed, his brain still a little addled after that jump to a conclusion he would take to his grave.

John trying to kiss him. Absurd.

“Fine,” Sherlock said, taking the blanket as he nodded, but John continued to eye him skeptically as he leaned back in his seat. “Where’s yours?” Sherlock asked, bobbing the blanket in his hand, and John rattled his head, waving a hand at him.

“I’m covered in mud; I don’t wanna get the other one dirty.”

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. “This is the only one you have, isn’t it?”

John blinked, frowning toward the back. “I- Yeah, maybe. Lemme just…” He trailed off, leaning back over the center console to rummage through the backseat. There was the sound of a zipper, and then a relieved puff of breath. “I knew having an extra set would come in handy!” He then stiffened slightly, leaning back up to look across at Sherlock. “Er, so, how is this gonna…”

Sherlock shrugged, totally nonchalant, not at all freaking out, the quintessential picture of casual. “Just change in the back,” he muttered, shifting further over toward the window, and John watched
him for a moment, searching, and then shrugged back, climbing into the backseat with amusing awkwardness.

“No peeking,” he snapped in mock scolding, and Sherlock laughed drily even as he wanted to die.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” he sniffed back, and John laughed, the zip of his jeans cutting through the air like a knife. Sherlock flinched, biting his lip hard as he turned toward the window, trying to block out the sounds behind his back.

He had seen John more or less undressed before, and, to be fair, it hadn’t meant anything at first. It wasn’t as if he’d been lusting after his best friend since he was 12, but 14? 15? Definitely 16. He couldn’t exactly say when it started, he only remembered staying over at John’s one night after a rugby game, the boy taking off his shirt in the bedroom on his way to the shower, and Sherlock had been useless the rest of the night, his voice squeaky and his mind elsewhere. John had thought he was getting sick, and, if he had been, he’d never gotten better, being arse-over-tits in love with John Watson having become something of a chronic condition. And now he was probably entirely naked mere inches from him and Sherlock was going to die, he was just going to die.

Suddenly, his head was flung to the left, something colliding with the right half of his skull to send the opposite side crashing into the window, and his lips flew open with a pained gasp, his hand coming up to the initial wound.

“Oh my god!” John cried, the car shaking with his frantic movements before he thrust himself up through the gap in the seats, grappling at Sherlock’s shoulders to turn him his direction. “Oh my god, are you okay?” he panted frantically, hands cupping into Sherlock’s curls as he tenderly held his hands over the no-doubt-growing welts. “Shit, I’m sorry, I-I was just putting my shirt on and-Sherlock?”

Sherlock didn’t notice he was laughing until he heard it, a throaty chuckle quickly breaking free to outright hysteries.

John’s damp fingers slid down through his hair, half in his curls and half curved over his jaw. “Sherlock?” he asked again, pushing lightly to lift his chin, and Sherlock shook his head within John’s grasp.

“You punched me,” Sherlock wheezed, and John frowned, clearly concerned at his lack of sense. “We’re-We’re stuck. In a car. In the rain. And you punched me!” He burst into laughter again, the entire thing absurd, and, slowly, John joined him, one hand slipping away from his body while the other remained, hooking a bit further around the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“I didn’t mean to,” John laughed, and Sherlock fell forward, his forehead pressing into the console between them as the top of his head shook against John’s chest. “Maybe if you didn’t have such a big head.”

Sherlock wriggled a hand up, jabbing the man quickly in the chest, and John gasped, jumping back a bit. Slowly, wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes, he lifted his head, catching John’s eyes where they were suddenly very close to his, and they both froze, laughter gradually dropping away as they stared the inches across at one another.

John’s hand was still resting loosely on the back of his neck, his fingertips twitching in the base of his curls, and a shaky breath rattled past the boy’s parting lips as his eyes flicked down Sherlock’s face, setting a spiral of panicked heat loose in Sherlock’s stomach.

Sherlock, for his part, was screaming at himself, threatening his eyes in every way he could think of
to *not* look down to John’s lips, but, naturally, they did, and John gasped softly as he tracked
the movement, his eyes growing wide when Sherlock looked back up to them. He wasn’t sure who
moved, or maybe they both did, but there was a brief blink of a moment when everything blurred,
John shifting too close to see, and then, just as suddenly, he was gone, hand recoiling like he’d been
shocked as he snapped back to the edge of the seat. Sherlock blinked at him, too stunned to speak,
and then rejection hit him like a freight train, plowing through his gut and blasting at his eyes with
the faint notion of tears.

“I- I-” John stammered, breaths trembling as he tried to steady them, panting down at his knees. His
fingers shook where they still hovered in the air, and he closed them into a fist, hiding them back
behind his thigh. “I’m sorry, I-”

“No.” Sherlock shook his head, forcing the best smile he could under the circumstances, but he was
blinking rather more than normal. “No, it- It’s fine, you-you don’t have to apologize.”

John met his eyes, his face crumbling, helpless and lost, but, though he opened his mouth, no sound
came out.

Sherlock dropped his face a moment, swallowing to steady his voice before he dared look back up.
“It’s fine,” he assured, adding a curt nod. “I-I know you don’t- It’s fine.” He threw in more nodding,
pushing his smile wider in reassurance, but John was frowning at him, tilting his head.

“Wait, what- what do you mean, I don’t?” he asked, fixing Sherlock with an oddly focused look.
Sherlock opened and closed his mouth a few times fruitlessly. “I- I mean you don’t- You’re not-” He
let out a stilted laugh, a breathy release of tension that only made John look more concerned. “It’s-
It’s nothing, okay?” he snipped, words sharpening as he struggled to push them out. “I know it’s
nothing. Just-Just the car or the rain or whatever, I- You don’t have to apologize.” He held John’s
eyes, though he could not for the life of him understand the expression in them. “I know I’m not-
That we’re not- I know it’s nothing,” he repeated, nodding once more, but, this time, it was more to
convince himself. “I know.”

John stared at him, eyes narrowing with growing confusion as they searched over Sherlock’s face.
“Nothing?” he breathed, shaking his head faintly, and Sherlock’s stomach clenched, his eyes
flickering away. “Sherlock, I- You’re not *nothing*, I- This was *never* nothing!”

“No, I-” Sherlock murmured, lifting a shoulder in a stilted shrug as he blinked down at his lap.
“We’re friends, I-I know.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Sherlock snapped his head up, shocked at what he thought he heard in John’s voice, let alone the
words, and a single glance over the painful desperation on his face confirmed it.

“Sherlock,” John breathed earnestly as he leaned forward, “I- You-” He stalled, breath ghosting over
Sherlock’s cheeks as he sighed, eyes skittering frantically over every single angle of Sherlock’s
stunned face. “I always,” he whispered, lifting a hand to brush trembling fingers across the edge of
Sherlock’s forehead, pushing his hair aside, “always…”

The sentence never was finished, but, then again, Sherlock didn’t really need it to be, John’s lips
pressing against his all the resolution he would need. For a second, everything ground to a halt, time
seeming to stop to give him a much-needed moment, and then it lurched back, racing along with his
pounding heart as he closed his eyes, pressing back against John’s mouth.
John seemed startled, a small gasp whispering between them, but he then pushed his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, his hold nothing but confident as he twisted his head to kiss deeper against his mouth.

Sherlock was mostly pinned against the seat, and there was an armrest blocking almost everything else he could do, but he managed to wriggle an arm free, reaching up to grip at John’s collar, holding him close, frightened he would drift away, revealing himself to be nothing but a phantom of the rain-soaked night.

John was very good at this, sliding his hand down Sherlock’s neck in a way that made him shiver, but Sherlock wasn’t exactly new, and he gave John’s collar a sharp tug, shifting the angle just enough to slip his tongue past John’s lips.

John groaned, his hand almost painful in Sherlock’s hair a moment, and then he thrust back against Sherlock’s tongue, swirling around it with almost worrying skill, and Sherlock was going to blame that for his confusion when John started pulling at the fabric of his dark red shirt.

“What-What are you—” Sherlock mumbled brokenly against John’s mouth, and John severed their lips with a pop as he leaned back.

His eyes were dark, glinting with focused determination, and Sherlock’s throat went dry with a swoop of his stomach before John even spoke, rough and raspy and spine-tingling. “You’re too far away,” he growled, and then grabbed at Sherlock’s wrist, tugging him hard so he flopped halfway over the console in one sweep.

With a little twisting and falling they would both later pretend had been smooth, Sherlock was manhandled into the backseat, John just shy of tossing him down flat across the seats before descending back to his mouth. John was halfway on the floor, and Sherlock didn’t have enough room for his legs, but they made do, Sherlock gripping helplessly at the back of John’s neck as the boy mercilessly licked into his mouth, Sherlock’s tongue growing weak as it tried to keep up.

When Sherlock was doing more gasping than kissing back, John moved to his neck, trailing down from the hollow beneath his ear until he reached a collarbone, where he roughly scraped his teeth before latching on, surely sucking a mark as Sherlock nothing short of screamed, possibly ripping out some of John’s hair in the process. He was panting something that sounded like it wanted to be words as John licked over his handiwork, soothing the inflamed skin, and then, an almost jarring shift to tender, his traced soft kisses back up Sherlock’s neck, finally landing back on his lips with a small peck against Sherlock’s uncoordinated attempt to reciprocate.

They just breathed for a while, Sherlock writing nonsense on the back of John’s neck with his fingertips as John twirled and twisted in his hair, but, eventually, the silent stretched out too long, and John sat up, settling a few inches away so they could talk without crossing their eyes. They didn’t talk though, not right away, John almost seeming to startle as he looked down at Sherlock, his eyes widening in a quick scan of disbelief before he relaxed, smiling softly.

“So…Baker Street, huh?” he breathed, tickling a curve over Sherlock’s cheekbone.

Sherlock chuckled, and then bit at his lip, suddenly self-conscious under the blue gaze. “If-If you want,” he managed to murmur back, shrugging against the seat, but John beamed at him like he’d just composed a sonnet, dipping down to glance another kiss to his lips.

“We should get presentable,” he said, smirking slightly as he pulled away again, kneeling on the floor. “The tow truck will be here soon, and I’d rather not give him a heart attack before he pulls us out of the mud.”
Sherlock laughed, but acquiesced with a nod, pushing himself clumsily up to sitting with the combined support of the seatback, the door, and the window.

Suddenly, John started laughing, clutching at his stomach as he looked at something over Sherlock’s shoulder.

“What?” Sherlock asked, frowning at him, and then turned, following John’s nod toward the door.

There, smeared across the window, was Sherlock’s handprint, the fingers trailing down in a sweep oddly reminiscent of-

“Oh my god,” Sherlock muttered, eyes widening in horror, and the whole car shook with John’s laughter as it broke down into mostly gasps. “Oh my god!” he groaned, folding his face into his hands, shaking his head in humiliation. “I’m Kate Winslet,” he nearly sobbed, and, though John could barely breathe for laughing, he managed to pull Sherlock’s hands away, pushing his chin up and capturing his lips in a way that made even the sound of the rain disappear.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
By Any Other Name

Chapter Summary

Prompt: John meets and gets to know Sherlock as a part-time employee at his favorite coffee shop (maybe falls in love too, but never tells Sherlock that, of course) but Sherlock is only working there for a case - fallennightmares

Prompt: Something with pumpkin spice lattes - anonymous

Chapter Notes

OH MY GOD, okay, so I am so so sorry that this took so long, but this prompt was just too good, and it got away from me, and...yeah. Forgive me? I'm gonna catch up, I swear! And this thing is almost 15k, sooo, yeah, hopefully you understand why it took a few days.

John rushed across the street, backpack bouncing against him as he went, the corner of his public health textbook carving a new dip in his spine. He’d just finished his shift at St. Bart’s, the hospital he had been placed at for his final year, and was now hurrying off to class—an evening course that met two times a week. The midway step in this routine, however, was a stop in at his favorite coffee shop—perfectly positioned between his dorm and the classroom at that point where he began to get cold in the evening autumn air—and he pulled open the door with a flourish, the bell tied to the top rattling with his entrance. He tugged at the scarf around his neck—a mottled green thing Harry had attempted last Christmas when she got into knitting—loosening the wool from his skin as the heat soaked into him.

The coffee shop was called “T.G.I.C.” (Thank God It’s Coffee), but was referred to simply as ‘Tic’ to anyone who frequented it, more out of laziness with the acronym than any sort of fondness. It was a nice place though, tucked away between a Vodaphone and a secondhand shop, and had an eclectic mix of traditional dark wood furniture and crazily upholstered armchairs, one of them even patterned with cats. John avoided that one—a preference he was blaming on a traumatic experience at his Aunt Paula’s when he was seven—but he could safely say the others were all very comfortable, especially if you were lucky enough to get there when the ones by the fire were free—a worn brown leather sofa, a blue chevron wingback, and a squat green velvet armchair, his personal favorite.

His personal favorites were also their lattes—they never overdid it with the flavoring like the chain shops often did—and he approached the counter, hovering in front of the cash as he fished his wallet out of his back pocket.

“Be right with you,” a voice said, and it was then John noticed the man bent down in the pastry case off to the right, grabbing what appeared to be a scone with a sheet of wax paper, presumably for the young woman who was hovering on the opposite side, looking strangely flustered.

“No problem,” John replied, watching as the man stood up, grabbing a plate and placing the scone
atop it before sliding it across the bar to the woman.

“Here ya go,” he said, and she smiled so broadly, John almost snorted.

“Thank you,” she practically purred, and John’s fingers twitched on his wallet, embarrassed by proximity.

“Have a nice day,” the man bade—polite, but not encouraging—and the girl’s smile faltered as he turned away, approaching the register, and John suddenly had everything in common with her.

He was new, John accustomed enough to the rotation of baristas to know when someone was a new face, but, my god, what a face! His hair was dark, even darker when placed against his pale skin, and his face was all arches and angles, setting off his grey-green eyes and bow-shaped lips. He looked young, around John’s age, and yet there was something older about him when he smiled, a sort of strain that John imagined always came with customer service.

“Sorry about that,” he said, tipping his head in apology, and John shook his head, dismissing it.

“What can I get you?”

To be fair, he recovered quicker than the woman did, but it was still a couple beats of silence before his throat worked. “Er, um, a latte. The, er, small one.”

“The pumpkin spice one?” the man inquired, brow creasing slightly. “Because we’re out of the flavoring for that right now, so I can do spice, but not pumpkin. Although, I’m fairly sure I could imitate it using components of the pumpkin muffin mix, but, so far, no one’s allowed me to try.”

John chuckled, shaking his head down at the counter. “No, just a regular latte. But you can experiment with that, if you want,” he offered with a shrug. “Find the optimum milk-to-espresso ratio or steaming time or something.”

“No, that was last week,” the man muttered, waving a hand in a flick through the air, and John started to laugh before he realized the man wasn’t.

“Wait, seriously?” he asked, and the man looked hesitantly up from where he was tapping in John’s order. John laughed, plucking out the correct amount from his wallet. “So, you were here last week?” he asked, handing over the heavy coins.

“Most of it,” the man replied, filing the money away into the drawers before sliding out change. “I started Wednesday.”

“Oh, right, that explains it,” John said, taking the few coins and dropping them haphazardly alongside the bills.

“Explains what?”

John looked up, the man’s head tilting curiously at him. “I- Er-“ he stammered, caught temporarily off-guard by the sudden intensity of the man’s gaze. “I’m in here a lot,” he finally managed, waving an idle hand around the shop. “I just didn’t recognize you is all.”

“Oh,” the man murmured, frowning down at the cash for a moment before turning away to start on John’s drink, and John tracked along with him on the opposite side of the counter.

“So, do you go to Bart’s?” John asked, a bit more curious than he normally was about the baristas, but, hey, they weren’t often this attractive.
“What? Oh, no,” the man replied, shaking his head down at the metal container he was slowly filling with milk. “I- I go to Imperial,” he added, a bit stilted, and John frowned at the back of his head, curious at his discomfort.

He moved on, however, not one to press. “Good school. So, shot in the dark,” he chirped, smirking as the man turned a sidelong glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “Chemistry degree, right?”

The man chuckled, raising his voice over the hiss of the machine as he nodded. “I suppose I did make that rather apparent,” he said, tipping his head in acceptance, “and it’s not much of a leap to assume you go to Bart’s.”

“Yeah, but I guessed your degree,” John pointed out, lifting a finger, “so, really, you should have to-“

“Medicine.”

John blinked, brow furrowing at the man, who was smirking softly as he brewed the espresso for John’s drink.

“Fifth year, clinical placement at St. Bartholomew’s,” he concluded, and John’s lips dropped apart.

“How did you-” he murmured, but the man cut him off.

“Your student ID is on the inside fold of your wallet. All student numbers begin with a three digit code denoting which year the student was enrolled, and yours is from five years ago. Your hands are dry, suggesting frequent washing, but you don’t appear to have any sort of compulsive disorder, otherwise you would be more hesitant about handling money or touching the surfaces in this shop. Then there’s the fact that your bag is open slightly, revealing the spine of a textbook on public health-“

John turned, twisting his backpack around to his side, and, sure enough, the corner of his book was protruding, and he shoved it back inside, closing the zipper.

“-and the depression on the chest pocket of your shirt, suggesting there is frequently something clamped there, such as an ID badge. So, clearly, you’re in the course of your fifth-year clinical placement, and, as to which hospital…” He pointed down toward John’s arm, where John looked down to find a blue wristband protruding from the sleeve of his striped jumper. “It has the St. Bartholomew’s symbol on it. Although, you shouldn’t have to wear a wristband if you’re not a patient.” He tilted his head, eyeing John curiously as he finished pouring out his drink.

John, completely dumbstruck, took a moment to reply. “I-I was in the children’s ward for a bit,” he murmured, blinking dazedly. “They didn’t want me to feel left out. How did you-“

The man shrugged, fishing out a lid and snapping it on the paper cup. “I just…pay attention,” he muttered. “It’s surprising how much you can see if you’re really looking.”

“Wow,” John murmured, taking his cup with worryingly loose fingers as the brunette passed it across to him. He then looked up, frowning, and the man froze, watching him warily. “You are wasted as a chemist,” he urged, and the man blinked at him a moment before he laughed, a low rumble of a sound that John couldn’t help but smile at, his chest seeming to grow lighter as he listened.

“Perhaps,” he obliged with a tip of his head, and John chuckled, taking a sip of his latte, and then froze, blinking down at the cup. “What?” the man asked urgently, coming to the edge of the bar. “Did I get it wrong?”
John shook his head, taking a moment before he lifted his eyes. “That,” he began, bobbing the drink in his hand, “is the best damn latte I have ever had.”

The brunette blinked at him, and then a slow smile spread over his face. “Really?” he asked tentatively, and John nodded, taking another drink.

“My god!” he said, emphatic, and the man laughed. “Seriously, how!?”

The man shrugged, making a gesture as if to put his hands in his pockets, but the black trousers were covered by a deep red apron, and so the movement was awkwardly aborted. “I told you,” he mumbled, “I experimented with it last week.” He then straightened up, smirking softly across at John. “Maybe not entirely wasted as a chemist after all, then,” he said, but John shook his head.

“No, you’re definitely still wasted as a chemist,” he countered, taking yet another drink. “A barista, however…” He lifted his eyebrows with a smirk, and the man laughed, and then they were just caught there a moment, smiling across the counter at one another until John cleared his throat. “Well, I should go,” he said, bobbing his head toward the door as he took a single backward step. “I guess I’ll see you around, er- Sorry, I don’t actually know you’re name,” he chuckled, pausing temporarily in his exit.

“Oh, right,” the man said, blinking down at his nametag a moment before looking back to John. “Liam,” he replied with a small nod, “Liam Knowles.”

John smiled. “Midterms scramblin’ your brain too, eh?” he asked, nodding down to the nametag Liam seemed to have needed to check, and the brunette huffed a laugh as he nodded. “I’m John. Watson. But, I suppose you already saw that on my student ID.”

Liam ducked his head, smiling sheepishly out the tops of his eyes.

John chuckled, speaking as he began ambling backward toward the door. “Let’s see, something you don’t already know about me… My favorite color’s red,” he offered, and Liam started to laugh, “I am exceptionally particular about my fish and chips”—Liam, though still laughing, nodded as if this were entirely reasonably—“and,” he added with a glance down at his watch, “I’m gonna be late for class.” John smiled, watching as the man slowly stopped laughing, shaking his head at John’s absurdity. “It was nice meeting you. Liam,” he added, because it’s always better to add names, especially when they are names of attractive baristas who make killer lattes and have even deadlier smiles.

Liam, of course, smiled, nodding back at him. “You too, John,” he said, and it sounded strangely solemn, strangely significant coming out in his deep voice.

John flashed a grin, and then turned away, the latte and glow of success keeping him warm all the way to class.

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“Okay, next item on the docket—”

“Did you just turn another page!?”

“We have a lot to get done this meeting, John,” Irene snapped, glaring across at him from the leather sofa. “We still have to finalize the catering for the Halloween Party—”

“I did that,” John interjected, and she tilted her head at him, frowning. “Yesterday. I sent you an email.”
“You did?” Irene questioned, sniffing when John nodded. “Well, next time, send me a text too.”

“Yes, madam president,” John muttered, and Irene glared at him.

They were holed up by the fire at T.G.I.C., an autumn rainstorm pounding at the windows outside, but flood warnings weren’t enough to deter Irene Adler, president of the LGBT Society, and, apparently, John’s life. He’d been their events manager for the past two years, practically begged into it by the cunning brunette overlord, and, now, he didn’t have a single spare moment that wasn’t quickly spoiled by her wanting to get t-shirt designs finalized or a new DJ hired. Somehow, they were still friends, however, and it could never be said that she wasn’t a good president, the society running more efficiently and making more money than ever under her leadership. Or, as John liked to call it, her ‘reign of terror’.

“Alright then, let’s move on.” Irene scribbled the Halloween Party catering bullet point off her list, and then moved down, tapping at the next item with the tip of her pen. “The group that uses the Hillborne Room before us on Wednesday nights frequently runs over their time by at least five minutes, and I think it’s time we addressed it, either with them or with the board.”

“The UNICEF Society?” John questioned, leaning over his knees, and Irene nodded. “You want to talk to the board about the UNICEF Society?”

Once again, Irene nodded, and John stared at her, mouth dropping.

“They raise money for children, Irene!” he spluttered. “Sick children, neglected children. And you’re gonna pitch a fit over five minutes?”

“We booked the room!” she snapped back, dropping her list to her lap. “If they wanted more time, they should have asked for it! Our slot starts at 9, not 9:10! And, no matter what they say, I know it’s not because that girl in a wheelchair has trouble getting around the table, because I’ve seen her around campus, and, let me tell you, she can haul ass when she wants to.”

“Oh my god,” John muttered, standing up as he pinched over his nose, grinding into his eyes. “I-I need more coffee. Who needs more coffee?”

A vague mumble of agreement went around their small group, and Irene narrowed her eyes up at him for a moment until she huffed, placing her list on the table in front of her.

“Fine,” she clipped, waving a hand at him in dismissal, “but I’ll need an extra shot in mine. Something to help me deal with this nonsense.”

“I don’t think they sell souls here,” John mused, and Irene sneered over her shoulder as he smirked back, walking toward the counter.

As he reached the register, hidden from her sight unless she leaned back, he sighed, wilting down to his elbows on the granite.

Liam crossed over from restocking the pastry case, chuckling as John tilted his chin up to look at him. “Still at it?” he asked, and John nodded, slowly sweeping upright.

“She’s got three pages tonight,” he grumbled, and Liam frowned, leaning over the register.

“But she had three on Tuesday,” he said, grown accustomed to their twice a week meetings—and a Saturday emergency that only John had shown up for—in the week and a half since meeting John, their society always convening during his evening shift. “Surely there can’t be that much new.”
“Tonight, she wants to talk about the UNICEF Society running over into our timeslot,” John chirped with mocking excitement, and Liam quirked a brow.

“UNICEF? As in-”

“Yes.”

“And she doesn’t-”

“Nope.”

“…Wow.”

“Yeah.” John shook his head, rolling his eyes as Liam turned, craning his neck to glance at the woman, who—to the best of John’s knowledge—he had only spoken with briefly a couple times during the past few meetings. “Do you remember what everyone ordered?” John asked, relieved as Liam smiled and nodded. “Good. Just another one of everything. Oh, but an extra shot in the harpy’s.”

“I heard that!”

“Good!” John shouted back, and Liam laughed, oblivious to Irene glaring at them both over the back of her chair as he punched in the order.

“Put it on the society tab?” Liam asked, and John nodded, the two of them moving further down on opposite sides of the bar as he began preparing the drinks.

“So, how’d your exam go yesterday?” John asked, and Liam looked over his shoulder, brow creased in confusion. “You mentioned it on Tuesday. Said you had an organic chemistry midterm.”

“Oh, right,” the man replied, turning back to the drink—some caramel something Molly always got. “I forgot I’d mentioned it. It was fine,” he answered with a shrug. “Nothing unexpected.”

“Well, that’s good,” John said, nodding as he leaned over the granite slab at the end of the counter where the drinks would appear. “Never fun when you realize there’s a whole section from a chapter you didn’t study.”

“Voice of experience?” Liam asked, smirking over his shoulder, and John sneered back at him, which only made the man grin wider before looking back to the machine.

“Yeah, something like that,” John muttered, shrugging. “Anatomy final a couple years ago. Completely forgot to study the arm muscles.”

“And you call yourself a physician,” Liam scolded, shaking his head mockingly as he placed the first drink down in front of John.

“I don’t call myself one yet,” John countered, and Liam rolled his eyes as he grabbed the next cup.

“Semantics,” he snipped, flicking a hand behind him, and John beamed at the back of his head.

“So, what about you?” he asked, folding his arms across the counter.

“What about me?” Liam replied, never looking up from steaming soy milk for Irene’s cappuccino.

“What’s your most embarrassing academia story?” John clarified, and Liam chuckled.
Looking back at John’s overdramatically eager expression, however, he sighed, evidently resigned. “I may have…set a small fire in the chem lab once.”

“WHAT!?” John spouted, delighted.

“Small!” Liam sputtered defensively as he hit the button to brew the espresso shots. “The fire extinguisher was barely needed at all! And I still blame it on my lab partner. Rebecca never could be bothered to read labels with any care.”

John shook his head. “Damn Becky,” he jokingly snarled, and Liam laughed, nearly losing his grip on the metal container.

“What’s taking so long?” Irene sighed, flopping atop John’s shoulder as she appeared at his side. “I’m about to pass out over there!”

“Oh, don’t tease,” John jest, and she slapped him on the arm as Liam bit his lip around a smile.

Irene noticed, of course, and rounded on him, pointing a bright green nail across the counter. “Don’t encourage him,” she snapped, and Liam only smiled. “And I thought you were on my side! I put a tip in the tip jar last week!”

“It was 7p,” Liam replied, shaking his head at her in bemusement, and John laughed, Irene huffing bitterly at his side, “and I’m not on anyone’s side.”

“Oh, a swing vote!” Irene exclaimed jovially, and Liam turned around, wide-eyed with growing panic, but John only shrugged, unable to help anyone once Irene had her claws in. “Excellent! So, Liam, what’ll it take?”

“Take?” Liam dazedly repeated, shaking his head.

“To get you on my side,” Irene clipped, official as ever. “See, there’s this UNICEF issue—”

“Oh, Irene, leave him alone,” John sighed, but she only tutted at him, shooting a glare before turning back to Liam.

“John thinks it’s no big deal that they take up some of our time. Live and let live, he says. Not like we’re doing important work too.”

“I never said—”

“I’m paraphrasing,” Irene snapped, and John turned away with a roll of his eyes, the situation clearly already lost. “Whereas I think they should be held to the conditions of the agreement they made when they booked the time slot for the room. So”—she clicked her nails on the edge of the counter, leaning up toward him as Liam stretched back away—“whadya think?”

Liam opened his mouth, looking hesitantly to John, who simply rolled a hand, encouraging him to go ahead. The brunette then looked back to Irene, meeting her gaze with a confidence John hadn’t been sure anyone could possess while staring her down. “I’m afraid my vote goes to saving children,” he muttered, smirking at her, and Irene threw her hands in the air as John laughed.

“Save the children,” she muttered, shaking her head at them. “Honestly, both of you. It’s the principle of the thing!”

“Alright, alright,” John soothed, batting a hand at her. “I know a guy in that society. I’ll mention it to him, okay? Okay?” he pressed as Irene only glared at him.
Finally, she sniffed, dropping her eyes away. “Fine,” she grumbled, and John smiled at his friend, probably the best one he had outside of Mike, which was a stroke of fate he never would have expected.

“Okay,” he said, pushing at her shoulder and turning her around, “now why don’t you guys move on to the next thing. I’ll bring your coffee over when it’s done.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Irene chirped, throwing in a mocking salute, and John rolled his eyes as he turned back to Liam, who was looking at him curiously.

“Captain?” the man asked, frowning.

“Oh, yeah,” John mumbled, shrugging. “I’m captain of the rugby team, have been since last year. Irene likes to pretend she’s not impressed.”

Liam, instead of laughing as expected, only frowned. “I didn’t know you played rugby.”

John blinked at him, his own head tilting in confusion. “I didn’t think you’d want to know,” he said, watching perplexedly as the man continued furrowing his brow down at the counter. “You should come to a game sometime,” he offered, if only to break the awkwardness, but the suggestion was rather appealing now that he’d said it. “The season only just started, so there’s a ton left. I could send you the schedule or something.”

“I- Yeah, I-I suppose,” Liam stammered, looking strangely nervous all of a sudden, so John took the initiative, charging on ahead.

“Great!” he chirped, pretending the man actually sounded enthusiastic. “You wanna give me your email?” he asked, pulling out his phone, but Liam shook his head.

“Um, no, it’s- it’s probably better if I just-just give you my number. I’m horrible at keeping up with email.”

John chuckled, lifting his eyebrows as he started a new contact, typing Liam’s name in the box. “Yeah, me too. Or, at least, I would be if Irene wouldn’t send out a search party without a reply within ten minutes. There.” He passed the phone across the counter for Liam to type in his number, and a strange expression passed over the man’s face, something almost sad about it. “Did I spell your name wrong? I never thought to ask, I’m sorry, I-”

“No,” Liam interjected, shaking his head, and, when John looked back up, he was smiling as if he’d never been doing anything else. “No, you didn’t. I just…remembered something. It’s nothing. Here.” He passed the phone back to John, number entered, and John tapped a few more buttons, saving the information.

Okay, so… I guess I’ll let you know when the next game is?” John presumed. “There’s one coming up next weekend. Friday or Saturday, I can’t remember which.”

Liam nodded, brightening a little. “Yeah, sure,” he said with a smile, “sounds good.” He turned away, grabbing a tray and placing it on the counter, and John helped him arrange the various cups over the surface. They bumped hands at one point, instantly muttering a tandem ‘Sorry’, and then looked across at one another with brief puffs of laughter at the synchronicity, but John would swear he saw a little bit of color rise up the man’s neck. “There,” Liam announced, leaning back and looking over their handiwork. “You sure you can carry it? These drinks are pretty heavy when they’re in proper mugs.”
John scoffed, sliding the tray off the edge and balancing it on his wrist. “You’re looking at the Slug and Lettuce employee of the month from January to March of 2011,” he replied haughtily, and Liam laughed one of his proper laughs, not the faint huffing sort of chuckle he used when customers made a joke. “I can carry a tray, alright?”

Liam lifted his hands to his shoulders, palms out in defeat. “My mistake,” he acquiesced, and John sniffed as imperiously as he could manage before storming off, Liam laughing loudly in his wake.

---

Hey it’s John! The Watson one in case you know a lot of Johns. Rugby game is Saturday at 4pm at the Chislehurst Sports Ground if you can make it

I can make it.

And I only know one John.

I bet he’s a swell guy

He has his moments

Ya cut me deep, Liam. Ya cut me real deep.

---

“Who are you looking for?”

“What?” John turned, blinking at Mike, who nodded toward the entrance John had just been craning his neck to see. “Oh, er, no one,” he murmured, shaking his head. He put his foot up on the bench, tightening the laces of his boot, and then looked once again to the door, finding Mike smirking at him as he turned back. “No one,” he said again, and Mike lifted an eyebrow. John rolled his eyes, waving a hand at his friend. “Round up the others,” he ordered, looking out over the pitch. “We’ll head into the locker room soon.”

Mike looked over him skeptically once more, and then ran off, his boots kicking up dirt as he crossed the pitch toward where the team was running drills.

John put his hands on his hips, looking out over them in assessment, and then, unable to entirely quell the dimming ray of hope in his chest, he looked back to the door, his heart skipping a beat as he caught sight of a particular dark head of hair.

Liam was scanning over the pitch, looking decidedly uncomfortable, his shoulders hunched as his hands hid in the pockets of a long dark coat.

John lifted an arm, waving, and the man’s eyes caught the movement, the relief nearly palpable even from across the pitch. John smiled, directing him in rather ridiculous fashion to where Irene and the others were sitting, and Irene must have caught the gesture, because she was at Liam’s side a moment later, beaming brightly and saying something that made the man blush.

“Ah,” Mike drawled, startling John as he came back up to his side, “so that’s him, huh?”

“Him who?” John questioned, but Mike only chuckled.

“Yeah, okay,” he muttered, rolling his eyes and elbowing John’s lightly in the arm as he passed.
John smiled after him, shaking his head, and then cast a look out into the stands, finding Liam beside Irene. He flicked a two finger salute their direction, and then darted off after the team into the locker room, all the more determined to make this game a good one.

In the end, he needn’t have worried, the team performing impeccably as always, but he had at least managed to make a few especially good plays, and was thus feeling rather proud of himself as he emerged out of the locker room, freshly showered with his bag hanging off his shoulder. He rounded a corner back out toward the pitch, expecting to find Irene and Liam waiting for him near the stands, but instead stopped dead, ducking quickly back around the corner. He frowned, looking side to side across the ground, and then peered around the corner, ears tuned toward the figures in the corridor.

“Oh, come on, Sherlock,” the man was saying, tugging at Liam’s elbow.

“I told you,” Liam snapped, pulling his arm away, “you have me confused with someone else.”

“No, I don’t,” the man chuckled. He was shorter than Liam, maybe even shorter than John, with a greasy mop of brown hair and thick fingers that once again grabbed at Liam’s arm.

John’s fingers cracked as he formed them into a fist.

“I never forget a pretty face.”

Yeah, okay, that was enough.

“Hey!” John rounded the corner, waving a hand at Liam and firmly ignoring the slimy-haired git beside him. “You ready to go? I think Irene wants to grab dinner.” He had no idea if Irene wanted to grab dinner, but Liam looked relieved at the reprieve, and nodded.

“Yeah, sure,” he answered, moving away from the shorter man, who tracked him with his eyes, watching the back of his head confusedly.

“Sherlock, what are you-”

“Sherlock?” John scoffed, looking between them. “Liam, who-”

“Liam?” the brunette man laughed. “Wow, that’s low, Sherlock. Even for you.”

“I’m sorry,” John snapped, folding his arms across his chest as he narrowed his eyes at the man, “who are you?”

“Sebastian Wilkes,” the man said, going in for a used car salesman handshake, but John cut off that effort with a sharp glare, and Sebastian withdrew the hand, his smile pulling to awkward at the edges.

“Sebastian Wilkes?” John repeated, clarifying, and the man nodded, grinning brightly. “Well then, fuck off, Sebastian Wilkes.”

The man’s mouth dropped open, and John turned away, snatching a shocked Liam by the arm as he dragged him down the corridor.

“Who was that guy?” John hissed as they opened out onto the pitch, walking toward Irene and Mike, who were chatting along the sidelines. “And why did he call you Sherlock?”

“I-I don’t know,” Liam replied, slipping his hands into his pockets. “Must’ve thought I was someone else.”
“Someone else named Sherlock?” John questioned, looking up at the brunette, who was avoiding his eyes. “That’s not exactly something you mix up, is it? I mean, it’s kind of a unique name.”

“I suppose,” Liam murmured, shrugging, and John watched him curiously a moment before he stopped, grabbing his arm to halt him.

“Hey,” he pressed, and Liam hesitantly looked to him through his lashes. “Are you okay? That guy didn’t…hurt you or anything, did he?”

Liam shook his head, cutting off John’s survey over his body. “No, I’m fine. Let’s just go get dinner.” He smiled, something slightly off about it, but he had turned away before John could peg it down, heading toward the small gathering of their friends.

“Yeah,” John murmured, following after him, brow furrowed as he watched his dark curls blowing in the breeze, “dinner.”

---

Thursday evening, John had been running late, not having had time to grab his usual coffee on the way to class, but he couldn’t do entirely without it—or go a day without seeing Liam, something that had hardly happened at all since they’d met those few weeks ago—which was how he found himself slumping through the door a half an hour before close, the shop empty except for the brunette barista, who turned eagerly to the door when John rang through it.

His eyes searched down over John for barely a blink, and then he bobbed his head toward the fireplace, which was still burning, albeit faintly. “Just sit down,” he said sympathetically, already pulling the milk from the fridge, “I’ll bring it over.”

John didn’t even have to energy to reply, and simply nodded gratefully, trudging over to collapse into the green armchair. He closed his eyes, pinching at the bridge of his nose with a sigh, and didn’t look up until he heard Liam stepping up beside him. “Do I look completely inept to you?” he asked, rolling his head up toward the man.

Liam quirked an eyebrow, bending to lower John’s coffee to the table in front of him. “Right now or in general?” he asked, and John frowned.

“No,” he clipped, John lifting an eyebrow at him in prompt when he didn’t continue. “No is also the answer. To both,” he clarified, and John snapped a quick nod, reaching forward to pick up his mug, breathing in the coffee fumes before bringing the foam to his lips. “Why do you ask?” Liam inquired, moving to perch on the edge of the leather sofa at John’s side.

“No, he’s god’s gift to medicine. And heaven forbid I have a question, because that is just a waste of his valuable time.” He sighed, cradling the cup in his lap with his hands as he stared down into the froth. “I dunno, it’s just- It’s not what I expected, you know?”

Liam nodded sympathetically, and something about it made John feel instantly better, like it really was a problem halved.

“Are they different answers?” he blustered, and Liam shook his head.

“I thought he’d be teaching me,” he continued, and Liam tilted his head with a thoughtful frown, “but I’m mostly just filling out his paperwork. I think I sign his name better than he does,” he joked, chuckling softly, and Liam smiled. “I’m not even sure if I’m spelling Eberhardt right, but, if you add enough loops.” He shrugged, still smiling but Liam was looking at him like he’d just seen a ghost.
“You-” he stammered, skin paling even further as his grey eyes fixed on John’s, looking something close to horrified. “You’re working with—with Aaron Eberhardt?”

John blinked, frowning at him as he lowered his mug back to the table. “Yes,” he drawled, wondering how Liam had managed to go this long without blinking. “Do you know him? I don’t think I mentioned his first name.”

“No, I-I don’t- I don’t know him, I’ve just- I’ve heard of him.” Liam rattled his head, looking down at the ground as he swallowed. “Just,” he blurted, snapping his head back up, eyes suddenly urgent, “does he ever- Do you ever go anywhere? After work?”

John tilted his head at him, brow furrowing. “No, I-I have class after,” he answered, and Liam looked unaccountably relieved. “Why are you asking me that? And what do you mean you’ve heard of him?”

Liam shook his head, expression easing somewhat, but it did nothing to settle John’s nerves, having seen the fear in the man’s eyes. “It’s nothing, I just- I know someone who dated him. It didn’t- Just don’t go anywhere with him, alright?”

John opened his mouth, prepared to demand answers, but something in Liam’s eyes gave him pause, an earnest desperation that John could only nod at. “Okay,” he murmured, and the brunette wilted in relief. “Okay, I-I won’t.”

Liam nodded, and his face almost instantly shuttered, cool composure returning as he stood. “I should start cleaning up,” he said, taking off toward the counter.

“Oh, um, okay.” John picked up his mug as he followed, taking a large drink now that the beverage had cooled. “Can I help?” he asked, perching his cup on the edge of the counter as Liam moved around to the opposite side.

“You don’t have to,” he said with a shrug, but John waved a hand.

“It’s fine. What do you need to do?”

They talked casually as they moved around one another, Liam tossing out an order here and there, directing John to what needed to be cleaned or moved, and it was well into the next day by the time they were finished, John’s horrible day wiped away with the ease of conversation and laughter.

“And you live there all by yourself?” John said, the topic turning to living situations as John bemoaned his roommates’ inability to clean anything while he was wiping down the shop’s counter.

Liam nodded. “For the moment,” he answered with a shrug, closing the blinds. “The rent is fairly cheap—the landlady’s an old friend of the family—but I’ll probably need a flatmate before the end of the year.”

“Well, that shouldn’t be too hard,” John remarked, tipping his head. “It’s in London, right? People will be begging to live with you.”

Liam chuckled, shaking his head. “You’d be surprised,” he murmured, and John stopped scrubbing, turning back to the man.

“What do you mean?” he asked, and Liam shrugged a stiff shoulder.

“People don’t often…take to me,” he replied, mumbling into the blinds, and John frowned at the back of his head.
“Why not?”

Liam chuckled. “All kinds of reasons,” he said, apparently unconcerned, “but I don’t want to live with just anyone anyway.”

“So then live with a friend,” John suggested, turning back to his task. “This is your last year too, right? I’m sure someone else you know is graduating.”

“I-I don’t really- I don’t have many friends.”

John’s hand stopped where it was scrubbing, and he frowned down at the smear of suds a moment before turning over his shoulder. “What-What do you mean?” he asked hesitantly, not wanting to overstep, but they’d spent enough time together over the past few weeks, it didn’t seem too much of a stretch that they were close enough for this.

Liam didn’t appear bothered, at any rate, moving to the windows on the adjacent wall. “I mean I don’t have friends,” he answered easily. “Really, it’s just-” He froze, hand stalling where it was turning the blinds closed.

“Just?” John prompted, hopeful anticipation lodged in his throat.

Liam’s back stiffened, and then he turned, looking tentatively at John over his shoulder. “Just you,” he mumbled, and John’s stomach flipped. “It’s- It’s just you.”

John tried to play it cool, he really did, but, honestly, when someone like Liam says something like that about someone like him… He smiled, ducking it down to the ground before it grew unseemly. “Well, good,” he murmured, shuffling his trainer across the floor. “I mean, not good that I’m your only friend,” he amended, snapping his head up as he blustered on, “but good that I am your friend. Because you’re my friend too. A really good friend.”

Liam spared him further humiliation, chuckling as he nodded. “I know what you mean,” he said, smiling softly, and John returned it, albeit sheepishly. Liam then sighed, looking out over the shop, and the awkward moment was broken. “Okay,” he said, wiping a hand across his forehead, “I think that’s AH!” The man’s long legs flew out from under him as he tried to take a step, slipping on the freshly mopped floor and falling with a truly impressive crash to the ground.

“Oh my god!” John spluttered, rushing over to him with slightly more care. “Are you okay?” He knelt down beside the brunette, who was rising gingerly up onto his elbows with a hiss.

“I-I think so,” he mumbled, moving a hand to his back as he sat up, but his face contorted in pain as he attempted to move the other arm, his body crumpling up as he gasped.

“Here,” John urged, touching lightly at the man’s wrist, and Liam gingerly stretched his arm out into John’s hand. John turned it this way and that, watching the man’s face as he moved down the limb. “Where does it hurt?”

“The-The wrist mostly,” he winced, and John tenderly gripped at the bones, pressing here and there as he felt for fractures. Liam flinched at one point, but nothing appeared to be damaged beyond some bruising that would no-doubt develop, and John gently lowered the man’s hand away from his face, his examination complete.

“Nothing’s broken,” he assessed, giving the joint one last twist for good measure. “You should be fine just putting some ice on it. Maybe take it easy for a few days.”

“So not making pumpkin spice lattes all day?” the man joked, lowering his hand to his lap as John
“Do you really make that many of them?” John asked, and then laughed as the man groaned, rolling his eyes.

“So many,” he moaned, head drooping as his neck went limp. “And we keep running out of supplies, which is a concept no one seems to understand. I can’t make you something we don’t have.” He shook his head, exasperated, and John chuckled, charmed by the frustration. “They smell awful too; I don’t know why people would willingly ingest such a thing.”

“I dunno,” John remarked, shrugging as he stood, “maybe they’re good. You ever tried one?”

Liam shook his head, taking the hand John dropped down to him with his uninjured one. “No, I don’t fancy myself a masochist,” he muttered, and John laughed as he hoisted him up. The man’s long legs got tangled up beneath him as he stood, however, and he overbalanced, staggering forward from the momentum of John’s pull.

“Woah there!” John chuckled, catching him around the waist with a quick sweep of his arm. “Careful! Don’t wanna…fall again…” he murmured, words fading away as he looked up, realizing how close the stumble had brought them.

Liam was blinking at him, his breath fanning over John’s face, and, for a long moment, John couldn’t do anything but stare, watching as the man’s pupils dilated within his grey eyes.

“No,” Liam breathed, shaking his head dazedly, his eyes unfocused as they roved heavy-lidded over John’s face, “we-we wouldn’t want that.”

“No,” John agreed, voice barely a whisper, and Liam’s lips parted with a small shudder of breath as John drew closer. “No, we wouldn’t.”

Everything blurred out, and then John let his eyes flutter shut as he tipped his lips up, capturing the man’s in a brief press. At least, he’d intended it to be brief, but, after a moment’s hesitation, Liam responded beneath him, tilting his head and pushing back against John’s mouth, and it was all kind of a mess from there. Liam gripped into his jumper at some point, and John into his hair, and, as they pressed flushed together in the center of the coffee shop, John was sure he could feel the man’s heart against his own chest.

He’d almost given up on this, to be honest, resigned himself to just being very good friends with the brunette barista whose lips still haunted his dreams, because Liam had never seemed particular interested, had always pulled away whenever John got too close. He wasn’t pulling away now, however, fingers gripped tight into John’s collar, and it was John who finally broke them apart, their mouths hovering just barely separate, their lips brushing slightly with every breath. Liam’s hair was soft where John had his fingers in it, and he twisted a little, savoring the feeling, and then did it again when Liam shivered against him, prompting a smile to John’s mouth.

“So,” John murmured after a time, letting his lips catch Liam’s bottom one between them as he spoke, “that happened.”

Liam chuckled, a quick puff of air that hissed over John’s cheeks. “Yes,” he mumbled, voice shaking up through his chest, “I suppose it did.”

John smirked, planting a soft kiss to the corner of the man’s mouth. “Might happen again too,” he teased, grazing their lips together in taunt, and Liam huffed a breathless laugh, chasing John’s mouth with his own.
“Oh, really?” he replied shakily, and John nodded, the smallest dip of his head he could manage while still getting the point across.

“Mhmm,” he hummed back, ghosting his lips over the man’s jaw as he lifted up from his nod, and Liam’s breath hitched. “And again and again and-”

Liam snatched suddenly at the back of his neck, tugging John’s mouth to his, and, though thoroughly surprised, John quickly recovered, and they both tasted like John’s latte by the time they pulled apart again.

---

John sighed heavily, dropping his forehead to his textbook where it sat on the table in front of him. It was Sunday, not one of his usual days being in the coffee shop, but those things did tend to change when homework began piling up, and having a barista for a boyfriend wasn’t exactly helping matters. Well, it was helping him get the homework done, he supposed, but it wasn’t helping his blood pressure—both due to the coffee and the fact that he was a little bit completely gone on the man serving it to him. He might have been getting a bit ahead of himself, referring to Liam as his boyfriend in his head, but titles were really only semantics when you got right down to it, and the past few days of stolen kisses and nonstop blushing were probably evidence enough.

There was a deep chuckle from behind him, followed by the telltale clink and vibration of a mug being placed on the table beside him, and John turned his head, opening a single eye to squint up at the man beside him.

“If you’re going to fall asleep,” Liam said, settling into the chair beside him, the shop entirely empty at the moment, caught between rushes, “you should probably move to the sofa. I don’t think anyone will be coming in until about 3.”

“’M not gonna fall asleep,” John mumbled, and Liam flicked his eyebrows, but said nothing, taking a drink from his own cup, the one coffee he was allowed to make for himself over his break. John sighed, sitting up again, and reached for his mug, stretching his legs out to tangle with the brunette’s as he sipped. Something caught his attention, however, and he lowered his cup, sniffing briefly at the air.

Liam peered curiously over the top of his paper cup, lowering it below his chin as his forehead furrowed. “What?” he asked, looking over him warily.

“Nothing, I just- Is that-” He stopped, sniffing again, the smell proving stronger as he shifted closer to Liam. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, the brunette blinking at him in confusion, and then his gaze dropped to the cup in Liam’s hand, which the man’s pale fingers immediately tightened around. “Is that a pumpkin spice latte!?” John spluttered, pointing accusatorily down at the cup.

Liam’s jaw tightened as he drew the cup back toward him in a slow slide across the table. “No,” he muttered, but John was too quick, snatching it from his hands and lifting it to his nose.

Liam huffed, scowling as he snatched the cup back, and John laughed raucously, watching the color bleed up from the man’s collar. “It’s not exactly the same,” Liam grumbled, and John only laughed harder.
“What, you added extra pumpkin?” he scoffed, and Liam glared at him.

Suddenly, the man stiffened, looking out the window past John, his eyes sharpening as he slowly lowered his cup to the table.

“What?” John said, turning to follow his gaze, but pale fingers shot out to grab his chin, drawing his face back away from the street.

“No,” Liam snapped quickly, and, as John looked at him, it was almost as if he were looking at someone else, the man’s eyes glinting with focus. “Don’t stare.”

“You’re staring,” John growled, trying to push Liam’s hand away and turn back, but the man held fast.

“Well, we can’t both stare,” he muttered, and John dropped his arms, giving the man a disparaging look.

“What are you looking at, anyway?” John asked, meeting the side of Liam’s face once again as the man turned back to the street.

“Nothing,” he replied, finally releasing John, who promptly turned to find nothing of interest at all, just a delivery truck and the flats across the street. “I should get back to work,” he said, and, halfway through John twisting back to ask what he found so interesting about the pub across the street getting a delivery, Liam’s fingers appeared once again on his chin, though this time only holding him in place while he kissed him.

John responded automatically, no matter how frustrated he currently was at the man leaving him out, and they let it go on a few seconds longer than your standard-issue goodbye peck before they pulled apart, Liam flashing a small smile before he got up and moved back across the shop, and John stared at his retreating back a long moment before he figured out what hadn’t felt right about it. A kiss shouldn’t be able to taste sad, but it did, somehow, and John brushed a finger over his lips, an unaccountable feeling of dread prickling at his stomach. For the moment, however, he brushed it off, returning to his reading as Liam disappeared into the back to make a call.

It went on like that for the better part of half an hour, Liam getting considerably more anxious as time went on, the frequency of his fervent glances increasing as they neared the 2pm mark.

“What?” John finally asked after meeting the man’s nervous eyes for at least the twentieth time.

Liam blinked, tilting his head in an ignorance John frankly found insulting.

“Why do you keep looking at me like that?” he added, and Liam frowned.

“Like what?” he murmured, and John would almost believe he didn’t know if not for the twitch of his jaw.

“Like I’m about to burst into flames,” John snapped back, and Liam opened his mouth, drawing in a breath to reply, but it died on his tongue, his eyes fixing on something outside.

“Oh no,” he breathed, and then scrambled, frantically fishing his mobile out of his pocket and texting, his eyes flicking between the screen and the door with ever-increasing panic.

“What?” John asked, adrenaline immediately quickening his heart, but, looking back to the street, he saw only a man crossing the street, although the amount of cars parked on it had increased. “Wait, isn’t that-” he mused, narrowing his eyes as he squinted at the approaching man. “That’s Dr.
Eberhardt!” he announced, surprised. “He said he lived somewhere around here, but I never thought—

HEY!”

Liam’s hands came down hard on his shoulders, pushing him back down into his chair as he made to rise.

“What are you—” John started to exclaim, twisting his head around to glare up at the man, but Liam silenced him with a sharp hiss, his eyes wild with fear.

“Don’t get up,” he muttered quickly, and his voice was curt and official, a sharp departure from his usual easy demeanor. “Be polite, shake his hand if he offers it, do whatever you would normally do, but don’t get up. You have to act like nothing’s wrong, do you understand?”

John blinked at him, shaking his head perplexedly. “Nothing’s wrong?” he repeated, and Liam’s brows started anxious drawing together as his gaze flicked quickly between John and the door.

“What would be wrong? Liam, what’s—”

“He’s a murderer,” Liam snapped, and John blinked, startling away from him in shock.

“He…what?” he wheezed, but the brunette did not pause to explain.

“The police are here to apprehend him, but they’re not in position on the street yet, which means they’ll likely have to wait until he leaves here. So stay low, stay away from him, and, whatever you do, do not spook him. Do you understand?” he asked again, more urgently now, but John could only gape at him, not entirely sure who anyone was anymore.

“How do you know—”

“John!” Liam bent down, grappling at his shoulders as he rattled him, eyes wide and frantic. “You have to do this, alright? I’ll—I’ll explain later, but, right now, I have to know you understand me! So do you understand!?”

Mutely, stunned by the ferocity of his previously rather soft-spoken friend, John nodded, and Liam drew away from him, relief settling over his shoulders.

“Okay,” he panted, swallowing as he looked once again between John and the door, “okay.” He darted back around the counter like lightning, John still blinking at the spot he had vacated when the door chimed.

He instinctively whirled around and found Dr. Aaron Eberhardt looking down at him, a surprised smile slowly dawning over his face as John’s insides curdled.

“John?” the man asked, and John smiled, bobbing a nod.

“Hello, sir,” he said, twisting on his chair to better face the man, but he did not get up, though proper manners pulled at his knees in an almost painful way.

“I didn’t know you came here,” Aaron continued, drawing up to stand in front of him, and, though John had never been given any reason not to trust Liam—and especially wouldn’t argue with the panic he had seen in his eyes—it was difficult to believe the man in front of him could be anything near a killer.

“Most every day,” John replied, nodding with what he hoped was ease. “Sometimes most of the day if there’s an exam coming up.”
Aaron chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t envy you that. I did well on all my exams, of course, but it was still stressful every time.”

John smiled thinly, the man’s ego somehow still managing to annoy him even after he’d been accused of much worse.

“Only one more year left, though,” he added, smiling brightly. “I’m sure you can manage.”

John’s fingers twisted against his thigh, but he forced a nod. “I’m sure I can,” he agreed, and Aaron beamed, striding past him and toward the counter.

“What can I get you?” Liam asked, and John gaped at him over Aaron’s shoulder, half certain he was the victim of some cruel prank, considering how nonchalant the brunette was acting.

“Hmm…” Aaron mused, taking a moment to tilt his chin at the overhead menu, and Liam used the time to shoot John a pointed look.

John turned back to his book, absentmindedly turning at pages and trying to calm his pounding heart as Aaron ordered his drink, keeping up light chatter with Liam as he waited.

“Imperial, huh?” the man asked, and Liam hummed affirmatively. “Well, you’re a long way from home. Why do you work all the way out here?”

John blinked down at his book, a disgusted expression growing on his hidden face as he caught onto Aaron’s tone, a slight drawling that drew the sentence out in a purr.

Flirting. The man was *flirting* with Liam, someone not far off from half his age, and then there was also that small matter of him being a killer, although John wasn’t sure which one of them fed into the bitter churning of his gut more.

“They were hiring,” Liam replied, still perfectly at ease. “There weren’t many jobs up near school or where I live.”

“Where’s that?” Aaron pressed, and John nearly snapped the pencil he was holding.

“Camden,” Liam replied, and John was mildly comforted by the fact that he was fairly certain that was a lie, Liam hardly seeming the type to live anywhere near Camden voluntarily.

“Ah, lovely town,” Aaron mused, sending John’s stomach rolling up into his throat. “I’m up there quite often, actually. There’s a lovely little café up on Parkway, Yumchaa or something like that. You ever been?”

The temperature in the shop rose at least ten degrees, John’s vision blurring as he tried to focus on the book in front of him, but instead his brain only registered Liam’s negative hum like it was in stereo.

“No. I haven’t really done much exploring around there, to be honest. Never seem to have time.”

John’s eyes shot wide. What was he *thinking*!? That was the perfect setup for-

“I could show you, if you’d like,” Aaron offered, and John could practically *see* the slimy smile on his fat face. “That is, if you can still stand the sight of coffee after working here.” He laughed, and Liam huffed along, John soothed somewhat by the fact that it was his customer service laugh.

“It’s hard to stay mad at coffee,” Liam joked back, and John physically had to bite his tongue.
“That it is,” Aaron agreed, voice rising and falling as he likely nodded. “So, whadya say?”

“I-” Liam stammered, but a car door slammed loudly on the street, temporarily sparing John having to hear the reply.

There was hardly room to park, there were so many cars on the street now, people loitering about almost aimlessly as they chatted with one another or read the paper on nearby benches, but there was something a little too artificial about it, a little too arranged, and John’s heart stopped dead in his chest.

“Fuck,” he heard Aaron breathe behind him, and was just snapping his head around when he was grabbed roughly by the collar, choking a bit as he was yanked to his feet.

“What the-” he blustered, struggling against the arm wrapped firmly around his neck, but then he felt a small circle of pressure against his temple, and stilled, fingers freezing over the man’s sleeve.

“Sorry about this, John,” Aaron snarled in his ear, tightening his hold, and John hissed in discomfort, looking out the window at the dozen guns that were now trained back on them.

“Aaron Eberhardt!” shouted a man near the front of the group outside, his hair greying around the temples, but his hands were steady—a fact John was grateful for, considering the gun held to his own head. “You’re under arrest for the murder of James Atkinson, and the attempted murder of Eric Gates! Let the boy go and come out with your hands up!”

Aaron chuckled in John’s ear, hot and warm and horrible. “There’s a few more than that, Inspector,” he shouted back, John wincing at the volume, his head turning away instinctively, but Aaron manhandled him back into position, “but I think I’ll hold onto this one, if you don’t mind!”

John coughed, the pressure on his neck increasing as Aaron began dragging him backward.

“You!” he snapped, the shift of his voice indicating he had turned his head back to Liam. “Where’s the back door?”

“It won’t do you any good,” Liam replied, but it was like someone else’s voice entirely, smooth and deadly calm. “They’ll have the place entirely surrounded by now.”

Aaron chuckled again, but there was little humor in it now. “Well, we’ll just see about that,” he snarled, John’s feet stumbling against the floor as he was dragged back further still. “I doubt they’ll be too keen on shooting when I have hostages. Especially ones as pretty as you two.”

John felt him turn back, breath gusting hot into his hair, and he might have thrown up if he wasn’t so furious.

“I have to be a lot more careful now,” he hissed in John’s ear, pressing the gun harder to John’s head as he tried to wriggle away from the man’s voice. “Ever since that med student of mine went missing a few years ago. I couldn’t risk it again, not without them catching on. But you, John,” he breathed against John’s neck, gun temporarily shifting just far enough forward for John to see it, his brow creasing curiously as he examined the weapon. “You were very tempting. Very tempting, indeed.”

“Stop, you’re making me blush,” John snarled, and Aaron laughed, gun pressing back against John’s temple, but John was no longer afraid, steadying his feet against the floor as they temporarily stilled.

“I knew you’d be a stubborn one,” Aaron mused, shaking his head against John’s. “Those are always the best. So sure they’re gonna escape. And the mouths on them!” He tutted disapprovingly, and then promptly devolved into a chuckle. “But we’ll have plenty of time for that,” he purred, and,
as John’s stomach rolled with nausea, he’d decided that was quite far enough.

“I’m flattered,” he growled, rattling within the man’s grip, “but I’m afraid I’m gonna have to pass.”

Quick, and with as much force as he could muster, just the way his military father had taught him before he’d died, John spun, grabbing the man’s wrist and wrenching it backward, the gun coming loose into his hand as Aaron cried out, his body bending back and away. Free, and now facing him, John quickly tossed the gun to his opposite hand, bringing it down onto the back of the man’s head with pinpoint accuracy, and, with a final wide-eyed look, Dr. Eberhardt crumpled to the floor, firmly unconscious.

John cleared his throat, rubbing at his neck as he assessed the damage, and then looked up, Liam’s eyes fixed on the motionless heap at John’s feet before they slowly tracked up to John’s face, wide and disbelieving.

“What- How-” he stammered, head beginning to shake, and John, conscious of the army of police officers at his back, merely twitched the gun in his hand, drawing the man’s attention to it.

“It’s not real,” he explained, and Liam blinked curiously at the weapon a moment before apparently reaching the same conclusion, his eyes widening as his lips popped apart in surprise. “Very realistic,” John allowed, tipping his head down to the model, “but not real. I know a real gun when I see it.”

Liam searched over his face, mouth opening, and then they were abruptly interrupted by what must be most of Scotland Yard barreling through the door.

“Sherlock!” the grey-haired man panted in relief as he entered, clearly the person in charge. “Are you alright? I came as soon as I got your message.” His eyes were fixed on a point over John’s shoulder, and John tilted his head as he turned, following the gaze.

Liam, still on the opposite side of the counter, winced faintly, eyes blinking as they dropped down a moment, and then, slowly, he looked back up, expression pinched with pain.

John had been hit enough during rugby to know what a punch to the gut felt like, and this was something else entirely, like having the entire defense come barreling into him, plowing him over and stamping holes in him with their boots. “Sherlock?” he breathed, and Liam—or whoever he was—opened his mouth, lips wobbling as he drew in a breath.

“John, I-”

“Hey,” a voice beckoned, and John turned, finding a woman staring at him, her eyes piercing out from within her dark complexion. “I need you to give me the gun, sweetheart,” she said, smiling almost sickeningly, but it quickly slipped off as John’s expression pulled into a grimace.

“Sweetheart?” he scoffed, lifting a disparaging eyebrow. “I’m 23. And it’s not a real gun.”

The woman blinked at him, but it was the grey-haired man who spoke, stepping forward and up to his side.

“What?” he asked, and John, careful of the direction of the muzzle, passed it up to him. The man turned it over a few times in his hands, and then, pointing it down at the ground away from them all, pulled the trigger. A flame erupted from the barrel, waving through the air a moment before the man released the trigger, extinguishing it, and silence rang out through the shop. “A lighter,” the policeman mused, staring down at the weapon. “He threatened all those people…with a lighter.”

The woman dropped her head, a grave expression on her face, but the man turned once again to
“How’d you know it wasn’t real?” he asked, bobbing the model in the air.

John shrugged, oddly at ease with the proceedings, considering the much more serious revelations he was trying to wrap his head around. “My dad was in the army. He started collecting them when he got back. I’ve been shooting since—since it was legal,” he amended quickly, and the inspector smiled, chuckling down at him a moment before lifting his eyes up to John’s right.

“So,” he began, lifting his eyebrows, “you said something about damning evidence?”

“Yes,” Liam/Sherlock replied, and John jumped, startled at the voice now coming so near his shoulder, and, instinctively, he looked up. The brunette flicked a sidelong glance at him, and then quickly blinked back to the inspector, leaving John chilled to the bone.

What was happening!?

“He began stalking another victim,” this apparent stranger replied, that official voice back in full force as he drew himself straight. “His car has been leaving at regular intervals, no doubt following the boy’s routine, and there’s a camera in a case in the backseat. All the evidence you need should be on it, although I suspect his flat will hold even more.”

“Trophies?” the inspector asked, and John snapped his head up, appalled.

“Nothing particularly gruesome,” the complete liar said, not sounding the slightest bit perturbed. “Likely just more pictures, but he may have also kept licenses or student ID cards. His focus is the pictures, though.”

The older man nodded, and then turned back toward the door. “Well, come on,” he beckoned, bobbing his head at the exit. “So long as you’re here, you might as well help. Could use a little of that Sherlock Holmes luck.”

“It’s not luck,” the man John could no longer doubt was Sherlock replied, taking a step forward after the inspector, and then he paused, turning back to John with slow hesitation.

John shook his head, looking him up-and-down. It was funny—almost—how he looked exactly the same, and yet everything had changed, everything thrown into a blender and scrambled beyond recognition, and John’s chest tightened painfully, his voice choked as he forced out words. “Who are you?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, eyes pleading, and then closed it, face dropping to the ground, guilt furrowing between his brows. “John, I-I didn’t-”

“Holmes!”

They both looked up at the greying inspector in the doorway, who motioned for Sherlock to follow, a look of thinning patience on his face.

“I can explain,” Sherlock urged, twisting back to John, his voice hurried as the inspector began walking away across the street. “Everything, I-I can—Just…wait here, alright?” He batted his hands in the air, motioning John to stay as he began backing away. “I’ll—I’ll be right back. I promise.”

“You promise?” John scoffed bitterly, and Sherlock stopped, eyes fluttering shut as he flinched.

“You,” a man beckoned, crooking a hand at John from the door, “come with me. We got a med team
“I’m fine,” John snapped, and, though he didn’t deserve the ire, the man didn’t look disturbed by the reaction.

“It’s standard procedure for a shooting,” the officer replied, and John frowned.

“But no one was shot,” he argued, and the officer stepped inside, moving to John’s side, his imposing figure clearly not to the denied.

“All the same,” he said, waving a hand for John to go ahead.

John watched him a moment longer, and then, accepting a loss, sighed, shaking his head as he turned back to Sherlock, who was still looking at him like a bomb that might go off. John set his jaw, betrayal burning potent in his chest. “Fine,” he snapped, and then brushed past Sherlock without a backward glance as he followed the man’s directions to the ambulance.

It was a quick process, following lights and answering mundane questions, and, all the while, he fought to avoid looking across the street, where he could see Sherlock on the pavement in front of the flat complex, arguing animatedly with a group of officers who looked even more ready to shoot him than John was.

“He good?” the woman from before asked the medic as she approached, leaning against the edge of the ambulance bay next to John as the man nodded, leaving them alone. “I’m Sergeant Donovan,” she said, neglecting to extend a hand, which was either rude or insightful of her, as John would have been inclined to refuse it. “I just have to ask you a few questions. Proper procedure and all that.” She waved a dismissive hand, and John nodded, having expected this was inevitable at some point.

“How did you know Mr. Eberhardt?” Donovan began, and John sighed, tucking the blanket he’d been given tighter around his shoulders.

“I’m shadowing him at St. Bart’s,” John replied, and the sergeant began scribbling on her notepad. “I’m doing my clinical placements this year. He’s one of the doctors I work with at the hospital.”

“Were you aware that one of Mr. Eberhardt’s previous students had gone missing?” she continued, and John shrugged.

“We heard about it—a med student going missing and all that—but I don’t remember ever hearing about it being his student, no.”

“Did Mr. Eberhardt make any mention of his previous students, or of any other close friends or acquaintances?”

John shook his head. “No, we-we didn’t really talk much, to be honest, and only when I was on his rotation at the hospital. I don’t think he ever mentioned anything about his personal life, now that I think about it.”

“That’s not uncommon,” Donovan supplied, nodding sagely as she paused in her notes to look up at him. “People like this tend not to give out too many details.”

“Serial killers, you mean?” John muttered, and Donovan tipped her head in acknowledgement before moving on.

“Just a few more questions. How long have you known Sherlock Holmes?”

John’s chest tightened, squeezing like a vice around his heart, but, for all outward appearances, he
only swallowed. “About a month,” John murmured, twitching a shoulder. “Maybe a little more. Just since he came to work at the coffee shop.”

Donovan nodded, scratching out shorthand of his dictation. “And were you aware that he was assisting Scotland Yard in an investigation into Mr. Eberhardt?”

John’s throat went dry, and he looked across the street, watching as Sherlock barked into a radio. Sherlock had been investigating Dr. Eberhardt. John had been working with Dr. Eberhardt. It didn’t take a genius to work out how John factored into this: a source of information, a mole, a connection —however tentative of one. It had all been a ruse, a game. A lie.

It had never meant anything at all.

“No,” John replied, clearing his throat when the word failed to come out. “No, I-I didn’t know,” he repeated, turning back to Sergeant Donovan, who was looking at him sympathetically.

“Try not to take it personal,” she said softly, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Sherlock… Well, he always solves the puzzle,” she allowed, and then smiled sadly across at him, “but he doesn’t much care about the pieces.”

John nodded, forcing up a smile, even that small movement taking a truly enormous amount of effort, and he pressed over the bridge of his nose at his eyes, suddenly exhausted.

“Why don’t you head home,” Donovan offered, flipping her notepad closed. “I have all I need for now, and we have your information if we need anything more. I can have a patrol car drive you.”

“No,” John said, shaking his head as he slid off the back of the ambulance, depositing the blanket inside. “Thank you, but it’s not far. And I think I’d rather walk.”

Donovan smiled, nodding with understanding, and then turned away, leaving John standing alone at the ambulance.

Lights swirled all around him, reflecting off countless police car windows and illuminating the flat buildings towering over them, curious tenants scattered along the fire escapes to catch a peek at the scene below. It was surreal, looking out over what had been a quiet city street on a lazy Sunday afternoon mere hours ago, but, then again, a lot of things had been different then.

John looked back to Sherlock, who was snarling at someone trying to force him into a blanket—the man having foolishly left his coat inside the shop—and a palpable ache spread across his chest, creeping out through his veins until he could barely breathe for the pain of it. The corners of his eyes stung—though with sorrow or shame, he couldn’t say—and he turned away, sticking his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders as he headed for home, feeling every bit the fool.

---

Where are you?

Did you go home?

John?

Please say something

Can I call?
Apparently not.

John please pick up

I can explain

Please talk to me

Please

---

Your voicemail is full

I don’t know what else you want me to say

Are you just going to ignore me forever now?

I’d rather you didn’t

---

I could just have Lestrade find your address you know

I won’t of course

But I could

You should admire my restraint

John please say something

Anything

---

I saw Irene today

She hit me

But I suppose I had it coming

And I now have it on fairly good authority she can throw a right hook

John please

I don’t know what to do

---

Are you even getting these anymore?

Maybe you blocked me
I suppose I couldn’t blame you
---
It’s been a week
Please respond
Even if it’s just to tell me you never wanna see me again
John?
I’m sorry.
---
“You’re sure he doesn’t work there anymore?” John asked for the hundredth time, muttering into his phone as he walked down the pavement toward T.G.I.C.

“Yes!” Irene nearly shouted, and John had to snap the phone away from his ear to prevent permanent damage. “I saw him get his last check on Thursday. And then I slugged him.”

“Yeah, he mentioned,” John muttered, and then had to jerk the mobile away again as Irene screamed.

“What!” she spouted, her voice so high, John was surprised there weren’t dogs howling. “You’ve been talking to him!? AND YOU DIDN’T TELL ME!?”

“I haven’t been talking to him,” John snapped, shaking his head irritably, a gesture lost on her, of course. “He’s been talking. I-I haven’t replied.”

“Oh, John,” Irene said softly, and John bit his lip, unprepared for the tenderness of her tone. If you were getting sympathy from Irene Adler, you really were fucked.

“It’s fine,” he assured, and the woman scoffed across the line at him. “It is, really. I’m fine.”

“In what world is ‘fine’ watching When Harry Met Sally seven times in one week?”

“That is a classic,” John snipped, wagging a finger up at his mobile for no logical reason, “and also entirely unrelated. And it was five times.”

Irene sighed, terribly put-upon. “Right, I no longer feel guilty,” she muttered, and John slowed on the pavement, frowning down at the concrete.

“Feel guilty for what?” he questioned, and then, rounding the corner to the coffee shop, he got his answer. A dark-haired, pale-faced, trench-coat-wearing answer. “What the hell, Irene!?” he hissed down the line, but Sherlock had seen him, of course, though he made no move to approach, merely uncrossing his ankles and standing up where he’d been leaning against the side of the building.

“He had such sad eyes,” Irene sighed dreamily, and John, though furious beyond the reach of the English language, couldn’t deny the quickening of his heart. “You know you’d regret it if you didn’t at least talk to him,” she added, a little anxiety slipping into her tone.

John sighed, pinching over his nose as he started moving forward again on gelatin knees. “Yeah, I know,” he grumbled, putting his friend at ease, and Irene’s grin was practically audible.
“Alright,” she chirped, a squeak of her mattress punctuating the silence. “Let me know how it goes, okay?” she added, but did not wait for an answer, the line beeping dead at him a moment.

Grumbling slightly, his slipped his mobile into his pocket, and then stowed his hands inside, pointedly avoiding Sherlock’s gaze even as he drew up in front of him. He bit the inside of his cheek, shifting his weight from heel to toe as he idled, and the brunette eventually broke the silence.

“I, er- Hi…John,” he murmured, and John almost laughed at the absurdity of it all.

Anger was temporarily overruling amusement, however, so he lifted his face, smiling bitterly up at the man’s sheepish gaze. “Ya know, I’d say hi too, but, thing is”—he shrugged, quirking his eyes to the sky—“I don’t even know what your name is anymore.”

The brunette flinched, shoulders twitching up defensively as he bowed his face to the ground. “It’s- It’s Sherlock,” he muttered, looking at John through his lashes. “Sherlock Holmes.”

John swallowed, trying not to look too closely at his eyes or his lips or his hair, or anything that was the same as it had been, because everything was different now, everything. And it could never go back. “Sherlock,” he mused, nodding softly. “Suits you.”

Sherlock blinked at him, brow slowly creasing with confusion. “Thank you,” he said hesitantly, grinding a stone against the pavement with the sole of his shoe. It was silent for a moment, and then the man sucked in a breath, lifting his head determinedly. “John, I—”

“When did you know?” John interjected, and Sherlock fell silent, lips closing as he frowned.

“What?” he breathed, shaking his head.

“About me,” John explained, stepping forward, pent-up hurt and angry rushing to the surface. “About me working with Eberhardt, when did you know?”

Sherlock blinked, looking over his face with growing trepidation. “When-When you told you,” he replied, and John scoffed.

“Oh, really? So it’s just a coincidence that you happen to meet me, and I happen to be working with him, is it?”

Sherlock looked to the ground, shaking his head. “I-I know it sounds ridiculous, but—”

“Yeah, you’re right,” John interjected, glaring venomously, “it does.”

“John, I swear, I didn’t—” Sherlock urged, moving forward, hands outstretched, but John backed up, cutting him off.

“Why should I believe you!” he shouted, and Sherlock startled to a stop. “You lied to me! About everything!”

“No, I didn’t,” Sherlock countered, calm but earnest, and John let out a strangled laugh.

“You made up a name!” he railed, smiling with disbelief at the audacity of the man, who drew closer still.

“But all the rest of it was true!” Sherlock insisted, slicing a hand through the air in emphasis. ”I really am going to Imperial,” he began, arms shifting through the air with every pleading word, “and I am going through for chemistry. I still play the violin, still hate popular music, and have still never seen a
James Bond movie. I still live in London,” he added, and then paused, rolling his weight on his feet as he cast a glance down to the ground, “and-and I’m still looking for a flatmate.” He looked up hesitantly, practically peering through his hair, and John’s mouth likely dropped clear to the ground.

“Are you *shitting* me!?” he raged, and Sherlock’s eyes snapped wide. John’s heart was thundering in his chest, his vision blurring at the edges in his fury. “You’re asking me to move *in* with you? Now!? After everything you—” He stopped, turning away as he rubbed at his temple, and then snapped back around as soon as he was able, shifting forward to jab a finger toward the man’s chest. “You— You selfish, arrogant, PRICK!” he bellowed, levelling one last look of red hate at Sherlock before turning on his heels, storming back down the pavement the way he had come.

“John!” Sherlock shouted, shoes flapping against the concrete as he followed. “John, wait! *John*!? You have to let me explain!”

“No, I *don’t*!” John twisted on the spot, startling the man as he drew up behind, and Sherlock staggered back, hand lifting in an instinctively shield against John’s rage. “I don’t have to do *anything*!” he snarled, cutting the air with a hand, and Sherlock flinched even further away. “I don’t have to give you one more *second* of my time, do you understand me? Not a single *second*!”

“You’re right.”

John faltered, arms slowly lowering to his sides.

Sherlock held his eyes a moment, and then let out a long breath, dropping his face to the ground. When he lifted it, there was nothing left in his gaze, no fight or purpose, just hollowed-out defeat, and John felt the bite of now-familiar hurt latch onto his stomach again as it sank. “You’re right,” the man repeatedly brokenly, arms flapping in a weak shrug. “You can leave. You can walk away right now, and I-I won’t stop you.” He shook his head, a swallow moving down his throat. “But… please,” he croaked, pained grey eyes lifting to John’s, “just-just give me five minutes. Five minutes and then-then I’ll never bother you again.” He shook his head, emphatic even as he looked miserable at the prospect, and John was already done for even before the last word even came, quiet and plaintive as Sherlock took another step closer. “Please?”

John held his eyes, and then let out a breath, turning his head away as he licked over his lips. He nodded at the ground, and Sherlock’s soft sigh of relief carried across to him in the wind.

“I’ve been working with the Yard for a few years now,” he began, holding the distance between them, a gesture John was infinitely grateful for, as it gave him the space to breathe. “Mostly just consulting here and there, lending my brand of expertise. I-I notice things. Things other people don’t. Like—”

“My student ID,” John murmured, nodding briefly up at him, “and the wristband. I remember.”

Sherlock twitched a small smile, more acknowledgement than anything, and then continued, looking up off to the right. “Sometimes, though— Sometimes I do something more. Get a little more involved. So, when Dr. Eberhardt’s name came up in the investigation—a man living on a university campus—it only seemed logical that I be the one to investigate. I was the right age, and then, considering the victim type…” He trailed off, but John nodded, the fact that Sherlock had been doubling as bait not really something John felt the need to go into. “I only started working at the coffee shop because it was across from his flat,” Sherlock said, and John couldn’t look at him anymore, the conversation getting closer and closer to the parts John had gone over a thousand times over the past seven days. “I could keep an eye on him, learn his routine. We were at a standstill; we needed concrete evidence. I-I never meant—”
John chanced a glance up, finding Sherlock’s head bowed, but he didn’t quite look away quick enough, and, as the man rose back up, John was caught in his watery silver gaze.

“I didn’t know you worked with him,” the brunette urged, shaking his head. “I swear I didn’t. Not until you told me. It wasn’t- You- I didn’t plan on you.” He huffed a choked laugh, blinking up the street. “I didn’t plan on you ever. Not for me. That sort of thing…” He faded off, hissing a breath through his nose as he dropped his eyes again. “I wanted to tell you,” he began again, broken voice barely audible over a passing car. “So many times, I wanted to tell you. But I-I was already Liam when I met you, and I couldn’t- And then it just went on so long, and the lie got bigger and bigger, and I just-”

John swallowed around the lump in his throat as he watched Sherlock’s mouth shift soundlessly in the quiet, his eyes blinking at the brick wall.

“I was scared,” the man finally whispered, and John winced away. “I didn’t- How do you say something like that? How do you explain it? And I-I didn’t want to lose you.” He closed his mouth, ducking his head with an audible swallow before taking a few steadying breaths.

Finally, he met John’s eyes again, his face set with grim determination even as he looked a hair’s breadth from falling apart. “I know it was wrong,” he said, voice barely trembling. “I know that, I do. And I’m not asking you to forgive me, I-I don’t know if you even could. But I-I just need you to know.” He broke off again, a breath wobbling in and out of his lungs as he stared down at his shoes. “I-I did- It wasn’t a lie. I mean, some of it was, of course,” he muttered, tipping his head to the side, “but not the important parts. Not you.” He shook his head, fixing John with a gaze that struck down to his bones, rooting him to the spot as it silenced everything but Sherlock’s words and his own heartbeat. “Everything that happened, I- It was me. Just me.” He lowered his gaze, shoulders lifting as he pushed his hands deeper into his pockets. “But I know you can’t believe that,” he murmured, shuffling a small step backward, and something in John’s chest stung at the added distance. “I just- I wanted to say I’m sorry. For everything.” He sucked in a breath, lifting his chin with thinly regained composure. “And I won’t be bothering you anymore.” He took a firmer step back, setting a faint alarm ringing in the back of John’s head, demanding he do something, but he was still too dazed to figure out what. Sherlock smiled at him, weak and misty. “Goodbye, John,” he said, and then turned, black coat flaring out behind him as he went, his curls shining under the streetlamps.

John’s previously stalled heart roared back to life, thundering against his ribs as it threatened to break free. The ground seemed to shake with every step further Sherlock walked, all sound lost to John’s ears apart from a steady inner monologue of screaming as a thousand contradictory messages ricocheted around his skull.

It was crazy—insane even—to consider such a thing, to think for one second that it could ever work, could ever amount to anything but a future regret, but oh the look on Sherlock’s face! And, watching him near the corner—legs too long, shoes too fancy, and coat something that wouldn’t be out of place in the Regency Era—John knew, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that, if he was going to regret something in the future, it would be doing nothing at all.

“Sherlock!” he shouted, and the man stopped beneath a streetlight at the corner, turning back to him, the surprise evident on his face even from this distance. John grinned, helpless against the bubble of elation swelling in his chest. “I’m gonna need that address!”

Sherlock blinked, frowning in confusion, and then, slowly, he broke into the brightest smile John had ever seen.
Chapter Summary

Prompt: Invited to a Halloween party (by Lestrade, possibly) to debunk a psychic. But when Sherlock attempts to deduce the psychic and expose her as a fraud, he has to rethink everything because of what she tells him (such as he and John are destined to be together, etc.) - darkrivertempest

Chapter Notes

I sometimes get questions on some of the references I use in these fics (like the Titanic one a few chapters back), so I'm gonna start putting a glossary sort of thing up here for anything that might be ambiguous.

Cassandra - a figure from Greek mythology given the power of prophecy by Apollo as an attempt to seduce her, but, when she refused him, he cursed her so her prophecies would never be believed

“A psychic?”

John lowered his paper, peering over the top to meet Sherlock’s gaze. He lifted a brow, looking between him and Lestrade, and then hid again, being absolutely no help.

Sherlock glared at the back of his newspaper, trying to force his displeasure through the classifieds, but John appeared unaffected, turning a page to read about sports he didn’t watch. Sherlock shifted his glare to Lestrade again, who was still smiling down at him like he hadn’t formed the most moronic sentence English had ever been forced to create.

“Yep,” the greying inspector chirped, bobbing a nod. “I know it’s not the kind of thing you normally do, but.”

“No, I normally deal with crimes involving people, not Ouija boards and astral planes,” Sherlock snapped, and Lestrade rolled his eyes while John folded his paper in half.

“Since when do you know what the astral plane is?” the doctor muttered, brow furrowing across at the detective, who narrowed his eyes at him.

“Since when do you watch phone-a-psychic infomercials?” he bit back, and John’s lips pressed shut.

“You what?” Lestrade chuckled, and John turned a glare up at him.

“I fell asleep!” John snapped, but Lestrade just laughed. “I was not watching that-that rubbish!”

“Of course not,” Sherlock said mockingly, shaking his head, and John sneered at him before flicking his paper back into place. Sherlock smirked, watching John’s foot tapping irritably in the air a
“You remember the Reynolds kidnapping?” Lestrade asked, and Sherlock nodded, opening the file so John could read it upside-down where he was peering around his paper, Sherlock not needing to look, all the information still stored in his mind palace from the original case. “We got a tip before you found the kids,” Lestrade explained, leaning down to flip to the appropriate page. “A woman called saying she’d had a *vision*”—he paused, tilting his head as he raised his eyebrows—“about where the kids would be found. Said it would be a wooden building near the water, and then something about the name ‘Harrow’.”

“Harrow?” John parroted, giving up on the pantomime and folding his paper, stowing it on the table next to his chair.

“They were found in the old Harrowman shipping warehouse,” Sherlock said, passing the file over to the man, who leaned across, snatching it and unfolding it over his crossed legs.

“At the docks?” John questioned, finding the photographs, and looked up, searching between Sherlock and Lestrade. “Near water,” he mused, frowning back down at the pictures.

Sherlock blinked at him, somewhere between shocked and disgusted, and looked to Lestrade for support, only to find the man looking gravely down at the file as well. “Oh, come on!” he spouted, looking between the two disappointments. “You can’t possibly be *buying* this!”

Lestrade opened his mouth, tilting his head in consideration, and John bit lightly at his bottom lip, lifting his brows down at the file.

“My god,” he murmured, leaning back in his chair, looking down at the carpet in growing horror, “I think this is the smartest I’ve ever felt. John, what day is it? Write this down!”

Lestrade groaned, rolling his eyes, but John smiled, and, really, so long as John found it funny, Sherlock was counting it as a success.

“You can’t seriously believe this woman is… *psychic*?” he scoffed, throwing a disparaging look up at the inspector, who sighed.

“I don’t think anyone’s suggesting she’s psychic,” John intervened, lifting a hand as he gathered up the case file again, passing it back to Sherlock, “just that she knows something. You thinking she was in on it?”

“It’s possible,” Lestrade allowed, shrugging as Sherlock handed him up the case file. “That’s why I called you. Was hoping you could drop by her shop, see what her connection is.”

“And if she turns out to be genuinely receiving messages from the beyond?” Sherlock inquired, and John snorted.

Lestrade looked between them both, shaking his head in frustration, that one vein Sherlock always made a point to try and provoke popping out of his forehead. “If you, of all people, come back and tell me she’s actually psychic, I’ll eat this tie,” he snapped back, flapping at the pale blue scrap of fabric wrapped around his neck.

“Oh god no,” Sherlock muttered, rattling his head. “That’s the one you were wearing for that sewer search last year, and you *know* that never *entirely*—”

“Oh god!” Lestrade spouted, yanking at the knot as he fought to get the tie off, and John laughed,
throwing his head back as he collapsed into his chair. “Oh god, I can smell it!” he shouted, stomping around over the living room rug as he struggled, and John leaned forward over his knees, crooking his fingers at Sherlock in beckoning.

“Is that really the tie he was wearing?” he whispered as Sherlock met him in the middle, the blond’s breath ghosting over his cheeks, and it took Sherlock a moment to reply as John’s aftershave momentarily overtook his brain.

“I don’t know,” he snipped, casting a look at where Lestrade was gagging, holding the tie at arm’s length, and, when he looked back, John was bowled over laughing even harder.

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“I don’t want to go.”

“We have to go.”

“Have to?”

“We’ve already agreed to go.”

“Well, that’s not the same thing, is it?”

“Sherlock,” John sighed, placing a hand on his arm, and Sherlock obligingly stopped. John smiled up at him patiently, but Sherlock turned away, looking anxiously back to the sign of the psychic shop, some ridiculous neon handprint thing. “It’ll be fine,” he assured, hand warm where it hung on Sherlock’s elbow. “Just get in, ask some questions, light some incense, and get out.”

“Incense?” Sherlock muttered, and John blinked at him, curious a moment before his expression fell to fond.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head as he pulled his hand away, stepping back and nodding toward the door. “Now go. Before Lestrade calls me again for an update.”

Sherlock hesitated, shifting his weight between his feet, and John sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Go!” he urged, pushing Sherlock lightly on the arm, and Sherlock glared over his shoulder at him as he approached the entrance.

Tentatively, he pushed open the door, a recorded sound akin to wind chimes echoing around the small shop at his entrance. There was a strong smell in the air, something herbal that probably promoted relaxation or gullibility, and Sherlock focused on breathing through his mouth as he moved further toward the interior.

“Hello?” he called, peering around at the various statues and crystals he was sure had ridiculous price tags and even more ludicrous purposes.

“Mr. Donovan?” a voice called from the back, and a woman appeared, smiling brightly as she pushed through a curtain to his left. She was older than Sherlock would have thought, somewhere in her mid-fifties, with red hair turning grey and green eyes surrounded in creases. She was wearing a long blue dress, her wrists bedecked in bangles, and crystals hung from her earlobes, trembling as she walked.

Sherlock pulled up a smile, slipping into character as he extended a hand. “Greg,” he said, using the fake first name John had picked, which had angered Lestrade for some strange reason.
The woman bowed her head in greeting as she took his hand in her frail one, and then brought her other hand up to the opposite side, Sherlock’s fingers suddenly trapped in something of an embrace. She tilted her head, frowning, and then slowly smiled up at him. “You’re a skeptic, Mr. Donovan,” she stated, chuckling as Sherlock blinked. “But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m Evelyn. Evelyn Greenwood.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Sherlock said, relieved as she let their hands fall apart.

“And you,” Evelyn replied with a nod. “If you’ll just follow me?” She moved back through the curtain, holding it aside for Sherlock to go ahead, and Sherlock froze as he looked around the room, every bone in his body demanding he make a run for it.

It was dim—always an ominous sight—with a small circular table placed in the middle of the room, draped in dark velvet. The walls were lined with tables covered in candles, which flickered and flashed up the walls, reflecting off the mirrors hanging around them. The only thing missing was a crystal ball, which was probably for the best, as that would have been the last straw for Sherlock, but, as it was, he managed to take the seat the woman offered.

“So,” she said, settling in across from him as she folded her hands on the table, “is this your first time seeing a psychic?”

Sherlock was extremely tempted to tell her to answer that for herself, but, remembering John’s waggling finger telling him specifically not to do that, he only smiled, nodding.

“Well, there are lots of different options,” Evelyn explained, opening her hands in a quick flick of a gesture. “Tarot cards, palm reading. Or we could just talk if you like.”

“Talk?” Sherlock questioned, and the woman nodded.

“If you’d rather,” she offered. “A lot of people prefer that at first. Just getting to know one another. So,” she chirped, leaning forward, “is there anything in particular you wish to talk about?”

“I- Er-” Sherlock cast his mind wildly around, trying to think of something someone would go to a psychic for, something ordinary people would whine about in overly fragrant backrooms with strangers.

“I can just start, if you want,” Evelyn interjected, smiling gently. “Go with whatever pops into my head.”

Sherlock nodded, that being easier, he supposed, and then the woman closed her eyes, prompting Sherlock to roll his.

She took several deep breaths, her hands turning palms-up on the table in front of her, and Sherlock was about to cough or something to ensure she hadn’t fallen asleep when the woman spoke. “There is much sorrow in you,” she said, and Sherlock’s skeptical eyebrow blinked back down in alarm. “I-I see- It’s
strange, I-I’m not sure…” She trailed away, eyes opening to search over him, and Sherlock shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I see your death,” she said, and Sherlock’s stomach dropped out, “but… not in the future. It’s-It’s as if it…has already happened.”

Sherlock was frozen, eyes wide and staring, and the woman slowly smiled at him.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she assured with a dip of her head. “So long as it makes sense to you. Now, let’s see…” She closed her eyes again, returning to her previous pose. “I see someone,” she said, and Sherlock, in spite of himself, leaned closer. “A-A man. He is very important to you.”

Sherlock immediately thought of John, then tried not to think of John in case the woman picked up on it, and then tried not to think of that because it was completely insane.

“I’m getting a…protector of some sort. A soldier.”

Sherlock couldn’t entirely suppress his gasp, and the woman opened her eyes, fixing him with a gentle look.

“This can mean a lot of things,” she explained with a roll of her hand. “It is, in essence, merely meant to indicate a loyalty; someone who defends or protects. But, in your case,” she added with a knowing tip of her head, “I believe it’s literal.”

Sherlock swallowed, no words forthcoming, but the woman didn’t seem to mind, only smiling and closing her eyes again.

“It has not been an easy road for you,” she continued, and Sherlock almost snorted at that. “There have been many obstacles in your path. I see…a woman. She threatens you.”

Sherlock leaned back, brow furrowing, entirely confused.

“You fear she will interfere. That things cannot stay the same,” Evelyn continued, and, just like that, Sherlock understood.

Mary. She was talking about Mary. Except that she was a fraud and could not possibly be talking about Mary and Sherlock really needed to get a better grip on himself.

“There was a choice,” the woman said, tilting her head as she frowned thoughtfully. “You-You don’t know. Were not told.”


Evelyn only shook her head. “That, I cannot clearly see—I am bound by what you know—but, I sense… He’s close, isn’t he?” She opened her eyes, watching Sherlock expectantly. “Your soldier. He came here with you.”

Sherlock tried not to react, but it was no good, and he knew it, his eyes widening as his lips trembled.

“You needn’t worry,” Evelyn assured, and Sherlock believed that much at least, fairly certain he could subdue the elderly woman, if required. Evelyn leaned over the table on her elbows, something strangely reminiscent of John in her face as she turned a fond look on him. “You care very deeply for him,” she said softly, and Sherlock’s throat closed. Evelyn chuckled, sliding her arms off the table before rising to standing. “You should ask him,” she said, moving to the curtain and pulling it aside, Sherlock belatedly stumbling to his feet and following. “About what happened with the woman. I feel it will provide the answers you seek.”
“Answers?” Sherlock questioned as he walked out ahead into the shop, turning over his shoulder to Evelyn as she guided him out. “I wasn’t looking for-”

“He’ll go with you,” the woman interjected, moving to stand at his side just inside the door, and Sherlock blinked down at her, wishing he could be confused, but he knew exactly what she was talking about, fuzzy future considerations of country homes and beehives fluttering into his mind. Evelyn smiled, placing a hand on his arm. “You just have to ask,” she added, giving his elbow an encouraging squeeze before opening the door.

Sherlock was halfway out before he stopped, turning back to her. “Wait, I-I didn’t pay you,” he murmured, but Evelyn tutted at him, waving a hand.

“Never mind that, dear,” she said, smiling as she leaned out the door. “Something tells me this will pay off just fine for me.” She then ducked back into her shop, Sherlock standing on the pavement outside until he could no longer see her through the window, the woman disappearing back into her candlelit room.

“That was quick,” said a voice to his right, and Sherlock startled, turning to find John walking toward him, two cups of coffee in his hands. “I thought you’d be a lot longer than that. Here.” He passed up one of the cups. “I grabbed some extra sugar packets too, in case you need them. They were those small ones you sometimes like three of.”

Sherlock took the cup, blinking dumbly down at it, mind still in a fog, and it wasn’t long before John noticed.

“Are you alright?” he asked, bending down and twisting his neck to peer up at Sherlock’s face. “Jesus, she wasn’t smoking pot in there, was she?” he snarled, pushing at Sherlock’s chin as he leaned in, scanning between his eyes. “Although, to be honest, you getting the munchies would not be the worst thing in-”

“John?” Sherlock blinked, eyes finally focusing on the man, who pulled his fingers away, expression curious. “What… What happened with Mary?”

John’s eyes widened a moment, and then he snapped his jaw shut, posture stiffening. “I told you,” he muttered, shrugging in a quick spasm of his shoulders. “We had a fight. But that was ages ago, why are you-”

“I know you had a fight,” Sherlock interjected, shuffling closer to the man, who avoided his gaze, “but what precisely happened?”

John twisted up to him, expression somewhere between confused and angry. “Why are you asking me that?” he snapped.

“I just- It never made sense,” Sherlock muttered, over a year of suspicion finally spluttering forth. “You were happy, you-you were living together!”

“And then we broke up,” John said, fingers tight on his coffee cup. “It happens. Now can we go?”

“Right after I came back, though?” Sherlock countered, grabbing at the man’s arm and holding him in place. “I-I never asked, but- It was me, wasn’t it? I-I ruined it.”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” John sighed, shaking his head.

“Then why?” Sherlock pressed, shifting to try and break into the man’s eye line, but John’s gaze just moved. “What happened?”
John opened his mouth, shaking his head aimlessly out at the street, and then sighed, finally turning to Sherlock. “I just- I had to choose,” he muttered, shrugging. “I had to choose, and I chose you. It’s really not that complicated.”

Sherlock blinked at him, mouth agape a moment before he made it work. “You-You didn’t have to,” he said, shaking his head softly. “If Mary wanted you to choose, you didn’t have to choose me. I would’ve been fine, I-“

“Mary didn’t make me choose,” John groaned, grinding his fingers into his forehead.


John sighed heavily down at the ground before lifting his head, eyes focusing out across the street. “I- I chose you, Sherlock,” he said, turning to him, gaze uncommonly blue as it settled pointedly on Sherlock’s eyes. “You came back…and I chose you.” His voice was soft and slow, every word formed with care across his lips, and Sherlock froze, his limbs going numb as understanding clicked into place.

“Oh,” he breathed, and that was about all he could do, pushing air in and out of his lungs taking all the brain power he had at the moment.

John watched him a moment longer, and then huffed a weak laugh, stepping back as he shook his head at the ground. “Yeah, just-just forget I said anything,” he muttered, waving his free hand in dismissal. “It doesn’t matter, I- Just forget it. Delete it or-or whatever.”

“No, John, wait,” Sherlock tried again, following as John turned, walking away properly now. “Let’s just go get dinner, okay?” John spluttered, barreling on ahead. “We’re close to that Indian place. Or there’s always Angelo’s, but we’ve been in there twice already this week, and he might-”

“How do you feel about bees?” Sherlock interjected, and John stalled on the pavement, frowning down at the ground a moment before peering curiously up at him. Sherlock’s heart was thundering, his tongue thick and trying to choke him, but he pressed on, too far gone now to go back. “I-I always figured I’d get some. When I retired. Maybe move out into the country. My aunt had a house in Sussex,” he explained, shrugging. “We used to go there in the summer.”

John tilted his head at him, eyes narrowing as he frowned in confusion, and he sucked in a breath to speak before Sherlock saw it snap together in his eyes, his expression abruptly smoothing to shock.

“Bees, huh?”

Sherlock looked up to meet John smiling softly at him, the smile specially reserved for when no one else in the world would find Sherlock charming at that moment. Sherlock shrugged, smiling sheepishly, and John chuckled.
He ducked his head a moment, nodding to the ground, and then looked up, eyes twinkling over a bright smirk. “I can live with that,” he said, smile stretching to a grin as Sherlock’s own lips quirked, and then John turned back up the street. “Come on,” he said, swaying to nudge Sherlock lightly on the arm, “let’s go to Angelo’s.”

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asked as he fell into step beside him. “We have been there a lot lately.”

“I dunno,” John muttered, twitching a shrug, “I kinda like the symmetry. We’ll have both our first dates there.”

Sherlock laughed, hoping it came across closer to nonchalant than elated. “Yes,” he said, smiling down at John’s smirk, “I suppose we will.”

John chuckled, looking back to their path as he took a sip of his coffee, and Sherlock took the opportunity to pull out his mobile, swiping out a message. “Texting Lestrade?” John surmised, and Sherlock nodded. “What are you gonna tell him?”

Sherlock looked up from the screen, a wicked grin on his face. “That he might wanna add some salt to that tie,” he quipped, both of them laughing as they rounded the corner, the lights of Angelo’s a twinkling beacon guiding them on.
John Watson had a problem. Not your run-of-the-mill, everyday kind of problem, but a real mind-bending, lip-biting, brow-furrowing kind of problem, the sort of thing that kept you up at night sighing repeatedly at the ceiling. He couldn’t say for certain when it had started, or even exactly what it was, but he knew the cause beyond any doubt.

Sherlock Holmes was in the year below him, 12 to John’s 13, and had been assigned to John as the student he was mentoring, something the school did for new people. It was supposed to help them adjust, help them get the lay of land, but, for Sherlock Holmes, it appeared to be more akin to torture. And John couldn’t figure it out.

He sat with Sherlock at lunch, and always gave him his piece of brownie if it was larger. He offered to help him with his homework, leaning over the boy’s maths book and poking down at this problem or that with the rubber of his pencil. He showed him where all his classes were, told him which teachers spit and which were fond of pop quizzes, and even brought in a spare lock of his for the boy to use on his locker, but, for all his efforts, Sherlock still hated him. Absolutely hated him.

They were two months into the school year, October closing out around them with brisk winds that always seemed to be carrying the scent of bonfires, and John had made zero progress, hadn’t been able to make a single dent in the boy’s sharp-tongued façade. It wasn’t so much that Sherlock was obvious about it, glaring at John or throwing insults this way and that, more that he just appeared… indifferent, like John could simply vanish from existence and he wouldn’t notice one way or the other until he realized he hadn’t been bothered by that blond kid for a few days.

Like right now, for instance, as John sat across from him in the cafeteria, trying to hold a conversation with the spine of his book while the boy hid behind it, munching at the corners of a sausage roll.

“So, are you excited about tomorrow?” John asked, taking a bite out of his pizza.

“Tomorrow?” Sherlock replied tiredly, turning a page.

“Yeah, for Halloween.” John lowered his pizza to his plate, leaning forward over the table as he continued. “The Mitchell’s are having a party. You know, the two sisters? Lisa’s in your year, and Emily’s in mine.”

Sherlock hummed, eyes never leaving the page, and John frowned a moment before rallying again.

“Are you going?” John asked, and Sherlock tilted the book just enough to expose a dark brow quirking up at him over disconcertingly piercing grey eyes. “It’s not a fancy dress thing, so you don’t have to worry about that.”
“Why would I be worried?”

“Just…’cause,” John mumbled shrugging as he pushed awkwardly at his plate, spinning it with a scrape across the plastic table. “I dunno, costumes can be annoying.”

Sherlock hummed again before disappearing back behind the silver-printed black binding of his book.

John bit at his lip, tapping his fingers against the table. “So, are you going?” he finally pressed, and Sherlock sighed, snapping his book shut.

He lowered it to the table, sweeping it to the side before he folded his arms atop the plastic, and then leaned over his limbs toward John. “I don’t know, are you?” he snapped, tilting his head.

John blinked, leaning back in affront, and then bristled, his eyes narrowing. “Yeah,” he bit back, and then stood,swiping his plate off the table in front of him, “so, if you wanna avoid it…” He cut off with a tip of his head, and then turned, stomping out of the cafeteria, determined to eat outside no matter how cold it was.

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The only people in fancy dress at the party were Lisa and Emily’s parents, which was, of course, horribly uncomfortable for everyone.

“Who wants to play charades?!” their father enthusiastically beckoned, a little muffled through the plastic fangs in his mouth.

“It’s Halloween-themed,” his wife added, blonde hair bobbing where it hung in tight curls around her face, dangling beneath a crown that denoted her a fairy queen.

While a fair amount of his peers actually seemed genuinely excited, John was among the group that mumbled through oohs and ahhs before delicately shifting to the edges of the room, hovering around the snack tables like they couldn’t possibly part with them.

“Can we go home yet?” Mike whined in his ear, and John hissed at him, peering around for eavesdroppers.

“No! My mom’s not coming back until 11,” he added, somewhat mournfully, and Mike groaned. “Oh, calm down, it’ll be fine,” John sighed, rolling his eyes, and then he caught sight of something over Mike’s shoulder.

Sherlock was sitting in the corner, looking rather caught by Alicia Thompson, another girl in his year. He was looking everywhere but at her, sipping on a cup of punch, his face pursed like it was pure lemon juice, but Alicia didn’t appear to mind, chatting at him amicably, her cheeks flushed bright.

John chuckled, a little sadistically satisfied by the scene, and then just smiled, shaking his head as he put a hand to Mike’s shoulder. “I’ll be right back,” he shouted over the guesses of what Henry Sandison was miming with his arms, and Mike nodded at him as he moved past.

He crossed the room, weaving around scattered furniture and the beverage table, and then drew up behind Sherlock, Alicia stopping to look up at him before the brunette boy was aware of his presence. “Hey,” John said, and Sherlock’s spine stiffened straight, “sorry, but I, er, need his help for a second.” He pointed down at the top of Sherlock’s head, smiling brightly at Alicia.
“Oh, um,” she murmured, looking almost crestfallen, and then startled as Sherlock stood up.

“Yes, science homework, terribly important. Nice to meet you, Amanda,” he muttered, swooping out around his chair toward John.

“Alicia,” the girl snapped, glaring at the back of his head, but Sherlock only waved a hand.

“Of course, Alicia, that’s what I said. John?” he beckoned, brushing past John’s shoulder and charging toward the French doors that led to the back garden, and John hovered a moment, wondering if Sherlock had ever actually said his name aloud. “John!?”

“Right,” he muttered, flashing an apologetic smile at Alicia before turning to follow Sherlock outside.

It was cold, but not unduly so, and they were dressed warmly enough—John in a jumper and jacket while Sherlock wore a long dark coat—as they crunched across the lawn, stopping near the tree line where the Mitchell’s had set up a large tub in which to bob for apples.

Sherlock slipped his hands into his pockets, looking out into the woods as he rocked his weight back and forth on his feet, and John watched him a long moment before realizing he was not going to speak.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and Sherlock turned, brow furrowing. “For saving you? You didn’t exactly look like you were enjoying that conversation back there,” John explained, bobbing his head back to the door, and Sherlock snorted.

“No, I was actually incredibly fascinated by how a spot on the back of her horse looks like a heart,” he muttered, and John laughed.

“Yeah, she really likes horses,” he mused, looking back toward the party again.

“You can go now.”

John turned back, frowning curiously at Sherlock’s face, which had transformed back to its usual apathy.

“I don’t need your help anymore,” he added, shrugging as he turned his gaze back to the woods, “so you can go. Stomp around like Frankenstein or whatever else they have on those ridiculous cards.”

John blinked at him, taken aback, and then weeks of slowly simmering frustration finally boiled over, fueled by a hurt he didn’t entirely understand, a sharp sting of rejection in his chest. “What is your problem!?” he snarled, and Sherlock’s eyes widened as he retreated a small step.

“I-I don’t- What?”

“Why are you such an ass!??” John railed, arms flinging out to his sides. “I’ve been nothing but nice to you since you got here, and all you ever do is-”

“I never asked you to be nice to me!” Sherlock snapped back, eyes sharpening as he glared across at John. “I don’t need you hovering around, getting your good deed of the day in by sitting with the freak at lunch!”

“Good deed of the- What are you talking about?” John spouted, rattling his head. “That’s not why I sit with you!”
“Then why?” Sherlock rounded on him, leaning closer, his eyes blazing as they reflected the twinkling lights stretched across the house in decoration. “I mean, I know you’re supposed to be my mentor or whatever, but I’m not a charity case!”

“I never said you were!” John countered, leaning back into the boy’s face. “I don’t sit with you because I have to; I do it because I want to!”

Sherlock blinked, anger falling from his face as his lips quivered apart. “You…what?”

John sighed, shaking his head out into the trees. “I just- I thought we could be friends,” he muttered, shrugging helplessly. “And yeah, you were new, and I guess that was part of it, but… I dunno, I like you.” He slipped his hands into his pockets, looking down at the ground. “You’re smart, and-and kinda funny on accident sometimes, and you always know the answers for my English homework.” He shrugged again, smiling awkwardly as he lifted his face back up to Sherlock’s.

Sherlock was paler than normal, his eyes wide with shock, and John’s stomach twisted uncomfortably at the silence, his feet beginning to amble back and away.

“But, I-I don’t wanna bother you,” he muttered, shaking his head at the grass, “and I know you don’t really like me, so I’ll just-”

“What?” Sherlock finally said, pouting in confusion. “No, I- I like you,” he urged, and John frowned, tilting his head at him.

“But-But you- You’re awful,” he murmured, and Sherlock almost smiled. “Like really, really awful. Horrible, even, you-”

“Oh,” he muttered, swallowing hard. “So…you don’t hate me?”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head at the ground. “No,” he said softly, looking up, the first smile John had ever seen on his face, and his stomach swirled in response, “I don’t hate you.”

“I-I don’t- I’m not-“ Sherlock stammered, huffing in frustration as he dropped his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose a moment. “I thought that was what you were supposed to do,” he said, nearly inaudible as he spoke to his shoes, “with-with people you like. There was a girl at my old school; she said guys were always mean when- when they liked someone.”

John stared at him, watching Sherlock studiously avoiding his eyes, and was just about to brush that off as something that only happened with girls, something only more-than-friends did, when he realized those two things weren’t necessarily mutually exclusive, that more-than-friends wasn’t necessarily girls. Sherlock probably didn’t mean it that way, probably hadn’t even considered John would think of it that way, but… Well, John was 13, not stupid, not so young that he didn’t realize his throat had gone dry the same way it had when Mary Morstan had asked him to go to the movies last year, but that was a crisis for another day, and, at any rate, Sherlock was blushing, so John assumed he had time to figure it out.

“Okay,” Sherlock interjected, and John ducked a smirk.

“I thought I was annoying,” he mumbled, shuffling his feet in the grass as he looked up. “To you. You never seem to wanna talk or anything.”

“Oh,” he muttered, swallowing hard. “So…you don’t hate me?”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head at the ground. “No,” he said softly, looking up, the first smile John had ever seen on his face, and his stomach swirled in response, “I don’t hate you.”

John smiled, biting at his lip to keep the grin from getting crazy as he nodded. “Good, that’s- That’s good.”

They were quiet a moment, eyes averted as the wind rustled through their clothes.
“You wanna go back in?” John suggested, pointing a thumb back at the door. “I think there’s food after charades.”

Sherlock smiled again, something John wasn’t sure he would ever get used to. “Yeah, sure,” he replied, nodding as he walked to John’s side, and they started back toward the house together. “What are they having anyway?”

“Pizza, I think,” John answered, and Sherlock hummed.

“I never really liked pizza,” he said, and John turned to him, mouth agape.

“Oh, okay,” he muttered, shaking his head as he pulled open the door, pushing it off his fingertips for Sherlock to pass through after him, “now we can’t be friends,” he added, and Sherlock laughed, John’s lips helplessly pulled up along with it.
Enter If You Dare

Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** John and Sherlock going into a haunted house on a date and John being protective!!! - anonymous

**Prompt:** Haunted house something - fallennightmares

We're halfway there! ((Whooooah, liiiiiivin' on a praaaayer!))

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ooo, what about that!?”

“The hall of mirrors?”

“Yeah, I wanna see if you’ll have a reflection.”

“Are you insinuating I’m a vampire?”

“No,” John chirped, smirking up at him, “I’m insinuating you’re incredibly pale and wear an overdramatic coat.”

Sherlock glowered, lifting his chin away with a huff as John chuckled.

“Seriously, whadya wanna do? We solved the case; we might as well have a bit of fun. Put these wristbands to use.” He lifted his arm, twisting the neon green bracelet up at Sherlock.

They—and by ‘they’, of course, he meant mostly him with some token input from so-called Scotland Yard—had linked together a seemingly random string of burglaries across the country, finding that they followed directly along with the route of a travelling carnival that was making its rounds. The season was coming to an end, however, the Halloween weekend outside London the last one before the carnival closed, so this had been their last chance to catch the thief, something Sherlock had handily accomplished by simply wandering around with John for a couple hours looking at the workers’ left hands. Kleptomaniac clown now in custody, they had the rest of the evening free, the sun only just setting over the swirling lights of the fairground.

It had been decorated especially for the occasion, black and orange bombarding them from every direction, and a lot of the rides had been given festive overhauls, new names and signage denoting the holiday. The pirate ship had been given a new figurehead in the form of a Grim Reaper, the ride renamed “The Scythe”; the bumper cars were now “Bumper Beetles” for some ridiculous reason, the sign depicting insects weaving in around the words; and a haunted house had been added to the site, a large structure given the façade of chipped black siding and broken shutters.

“We could do the Devil’s Drop,” John suggested, pointing at the drop tower—which had, unsurprisingly, been able to keep its name. “Or the Ferris wheel. That’s a bit boring though, I guess.”

Sherlock only shrugged.
John sighed, rolling his eyes up at him. “Oh, come on, there has to be something you wanna do. We could play some of the games! I could win you a giant stuffed dog or something.”

“What would I do with a giant stuffed dog?” Sherlock muttered, frowning down at him. “And why would you have to win it for me? I could win my own giant stuffed dog.”

“Yeah, but what would you do with it?” John mocked, grinning when Sherlock glared. “What about the haunted house?” He grabbed at Sherlock’s arm, stalling him in front of the faux-dilapidated building. “I think it’s one of those ones you ride through. That could be fun.”

Sherlock shifted his weight between his feet, jaw twitching minutely as he looked up at the ride. “We don’t have to stay,” he said airily, shrugging a shoulder. “It’s not like we paid for the wristbands, and you have that biology test tomorrow.”

“It’s barely 7,” John scoffed, grabbing him round the elbow and pulling him forward, oblivious to the lump of terror clogging Sherlock’s throat. “Come on! Just this one, and then we’ll go, I promise.”

Sherlock hesitated at the base of the stairs, John already halfway up them, and he almost told him, almost opened his mouth and admitted he was human, but then John looked back at him, boyish excitement twinkling in his blue eyes, and Sherlock was lost. He sighed, moving a foot onto the first step, and then he was suddenly at the top, John dragging him along, hand shifting to grip at Sherlock’s wrist.

The line was short, and they were quickly being ushered into one of the black cars, a tired attendant pushing a metal bar down to their laps, giving it a rattling yank to test for security before moving to the next group. There was a curtain in front of them, red velvet pulled back just far enough by ropes to allow the cars to pass through, and, from around the corner of the curving tunnel, Sherlock could see lights flashing, a faint mist of fog creeping across the ground over the tracks.

He gripped his fingers onto the bar to hide their shaking, taking a slow breath, but it quickly turned to a gasp as John nudged him lightly on the arm.

“Hey,” he said, brow furrowed in concern as he looked between Sherlock’s eyes, “are you alright?”

Sherlock sniffed, forcing his expression to haughty. “Of course,” he replied, but John continued eyeing him curiously.

Luckily, or perhaps not, the car began to move, and John’s attention turned back to the front as they rattled forward along the track.

The first room was relatively tame, all things considered. It appeared to be some sort of banquet hall or foyer, carpet red and walls wood paneling, but then the coffin came into view, and Sherlock’s stomach sank.

“So, it’s…what?” John muttered beside him, breath hissing up toward Sherlock’s ear. “A funeral parlor?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, but didn’t get the chance to answer, a body snapping up from the confines of the coffin, its nearly decapitated head flopping grotesquely back behind it. Sherlock didn’t quite jump, but his stomach rolled, fingers closing to white-knuckle on the bar as he stared back at the mannequin’s head, its eyes open and gazing back at him upside-down.

John only laughed. “You know, I saw it coming, but still!”

“Yeah,” Sherlock forced a chuckle, swallowing hard in dread. “Still.”
It went downhill drastically from there, lunging witches and zombies and vampires—‘Oh my!’ John would say—leaping out at them from every turn, accompanied by flashing lights and shrieking sound effects. One room appeared to be a dentist’s office, blood painted over the walls while a gruesome figure in green scrubs stood over what had once been a patient’s head, but was now mostly slowly spinning drill.

“Now that’s too far,” John murmured, and Sherlock only nodded, not trusting his mouth to open and not emit a scream.

Soon after, and hopefully nearing the end of a ride, they were rolling through a cemetery, ghosts projected around the walls in a dizzying vortex while zombies popped up at them, blood-stained fabric swaying in the breeze produced by the fog machine, which was misting over the ground, cold where it drifted into the car at their feet. Suddenly, they stopped, car grating to a halt on the tracks, and Sherlock slid forward in his seat, searching anxiously around.

“What-What happened?” he murmured, swallowing thickly, his heart caught in his throat.

John leaned around the side of the car, peering behind them. “Dunno,” he mumbled. “I guess they stopped the ride.”

“Oh, brilliant, John!” Sherlock mocked, voice pulling tight, and John turned back around to him, perplexed. “I couldn’t possibly have inferred that myself by the fact that we stopped moving!” His breath was quick and ragged as he glared across at John, who opened his mouth, clearly offended, but then stopped, expression turning curious as he scanned between Sherlock’s eyes.

“Sherlock, what- What’s wrong?” he asked, and Sherlock snapped his lips shut. “What are you- Are you scared?”

“What?” Sherlock laughed, shaking his head at John’s lunacy, but there was a sudden scream from behind him, and he startled away, shooting across the seat into John as he spun to face the zombie that had sprung up behind him.

“Oh my god,” John said, leaning forward to peer around and meet Sherlock’s eyes. “You are. You’re scared!”

Sherlock shifted, his leg not pressed quite so firmly against John’s, but he wasn’t going to move all the way back over, it only a matter of timers until the zombie popped up again. “No, I’m-”

“Why didn’t you say something?” John interjected, and it was clear from his eyes that there was no hope of prevaricating.

Sherlock sighed, shaking his head down at his lap, and then promptly shooting back up as another scream came from up ahead.

“You could’ve told me,” John urged, tilting his body toward Sherlock’s, their knees pushing together. “We didn’t have to do it.”

“Yes, we did,” Sherlock spat, rattling his head, “because you had the look, and we always do whatever you want when you have the look!”

“The-The look?” John questioned, head shaking in bemusement. “I don’t know what-”

“The look, it’s a look, you have a look!” Sherlock spat out, and then let out a strangled yelp, lifting his hand instinctively as the zombie popped back up.

Sherlock held his eyes a moment longer, gaining strength, and then dropped his gaze to John’s jumper as he slowed his breaths. “I- When I was younger, we-we were at a carnival, and I wanted to go in the haunted house, and-and Mycroft wouldn’t take me, so I snuck in the back and…I got lost.”

John frowned in sympathy, and then nodded thoughtfully, encouraging him to continue.

Sherlock swallowed, closing his eyes as he flinched at another shriek. “I-I was in there for almost an hour before they found me, and-and ever since, I…” He trailed away, rattling his head, and then stopped, his attention caught by John’s hands covering his. He looked up, blinking in surprise, and John smiled back at him.

“Well, I’m sure we won’t be stuck here that long,” he assured, tightening his grip on Sherlock’s hands. “It’s probably just a glitch. We’ll be moving any second now.”

Sherlock nodded, slowly starting to believe it under the reassuring warmth of John’s hold, but then that damn zombie shot back up again, and he jumped, fingers clenching back against John’s.

“Oh, okay,” John urged, turning to face Sherlock more fully as he pulled his hands into his lap. “Just focus on something else, like…cause of death!”

“Cause of death?” Sherlock spluttered, turning an incredulous look up at him, but John just nodded.

“Well! The zombie, how did he die?” John asked, and Sherlock gaped at him.

“What are you—”

“Just think about it, Sherlock,” John interjected, bobbing their hands. “You saw him, if only for a second, and that’s always plenty long enough for you. So how did he die?”

Sherlock’s mouth shifted soundlessly, but John looked determined, and so he closed his lips, shutting his eyes as he thought. The image swirled into focus, less terrifying now that he was looking at it more closely, the eyes only polished plastic, the blood only colored rubber. He zoomed in on the wound, an impression on the zombie’s head, and Sherlock’s own head tilted as he thought. “Blunt force trauma,” he said, heart rate slowly steadying as he spoke. “Cylindrical weapon. Maybe a pipe or a bat.”

“Good, good,” John affirmed, thumbs trailing stripes over the backs of Sherlock’s hands. “And the man in the dining room, the one with the knife in him.”

“I think that one’s fairly apparent,” he muttered, opening his eyes at John, who chuckled.

“Yes, but how many stab wounds?” he asked, lifting his brows, and Sherlock thought, forehead furrowing down at John’s chest.

“Counting the one the knife was still in?” he inquired, and John smiled, nodding. “Seven. But you have no idea if I’m right,” Sherlock argued, but John’s smile didn’t falter.

“Of course you’re right,” he said, and there was hardly room to be afraid anymore, Sherlock’s chest filling with such heat. “Now, just behind us. The guy in the coffin.”

“Strangulation.”
“How can you tell?”

“How can you tell?”

“Bruising on the neck. Too uniform to be manual.”

“Rope?”

“No, there was no patterning. But I suppose that could be an artistic inaccuracy.”

The car shook to life as they began moving again, and Sherlock blinked, genuinely having forgotten their predicament. He looked around, stunned, and then his eyes settled on John, who was smiling at him, soft and fond. Sherlock opened his mouth, sure he should say something, but couldn’t for the life of him find the words.

Of course, John, as always, already knew, and nodded, drifting back to his side of the seat. His fingers dragged as they pulled away, echoing Sherlock’s reluctance, and then the car broke out into the light, the ride ending with copious apologies from the staff.

They didn’t speak as they descended the steps of the ride, the sky darker now than when they’d entered, and more people had arrived, the grounds covered with families and shouting teenagers eager to milk all the fun they could out of the carnival’s last night.

Sherlock stared out at the lights, his entire left side burning with John’s proximity, and he took in a breath, gambling on his tongue coming up with something worthy of all the thoughts spinning around in his brain. “John, I—”

“I think I could win that one.”

Sherlock turned, finding John nodding toward one of the game stalls, an arrangement of bottles on a pedestal that patrons were attempting to knock over by throwing a small ball.

“I don’t think they have dogs,” he continued, “but the frogs have Velcro hands.” He turned a smile up at Sherlock, who was thoroughly befuddled for a moment before he remembered, blinking back to the stall as a smile tugged at his lips.

“Why would that be a beneficial feature for a plush frog?” he asked, and John beamed.

“So you can wear it around your neck with pride!” he pronounced, and Sherlock laughed, tugged along as John grabbed his hand, this time with their fingers laced.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
Chapter Summary

**Prompt: Something student/teacher maybe?**

A lot of people were also asking for more angst in these prompts (yes, that is a real thing that really happens, apparently) so I hope this satisfies. You monsters.

**Warning: Drug use**

Chapter Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Here.”

Sherlock looked up, Irene drawing back to his side, a wine glass in each of her hands.

“They only had red,” she said, shrugging a shoulder as she passed a glass to him, and Sherlock snatched it up.

“At this point, I’d drink it out of a box,” he snarled, tipping up the cup, and Irene laughed, sipping at her own. “Why did you drag me to this thing?”

“Because, once you’re done with grad school, you’re going to need a job,” Irene explained, tipping her head. “And look!” She waved a hand out at the room full of professors and various benefactors, all bedecked in suits and glittering gowns. “A room full of people who will die soon and leave one vacant!”

“I’ve told you,” Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes as he leaned back against the wall, tugging uncomfortably at the knot of his tie, “I’m not working at the university. I’m getting my graduate degree and then getting as far away as possible.”

“But then I’ll be all alone,” Irene whined, pouting her red lips at him, forest green dress rustling as she childishly waggled her shoulders. “Wasting away in my dark corner of the psychology department.”

“You’re already mostly alone,” Sherlock reminded, crossing his arms, his black suit jacket and white button-down pulling up over his wrists. “I hardly go over there anymore.”

“Afraid we’ll figure out what’s wrong with you?” Irene asked, nodding sympathetically, and Sherlock sneered at her over his wine. “Fine, even if you’re not looking for a job,” she muttered, burrowing her arm in to link with his, “you’re still excellent arm candy.”

Sherlock laughed, shaking his head as Irene pressed against his side, the both of them turning back
The art department had recently acquired an elaborate collection from some dead artist or another, and was throwing a large event for the unveiling, exclusive to faculty and people willing to write large checks. Consequently, the room was full of rich old men and their bored wives, all of them pretending to be able to make sense of the glorified paint splatters.

“What do you reckon that one is?” Irene asked, nodding toward a canvas that appeared to be entirely blank save for a small blue dot in the center.

“I’d guess…Every Intelligent Thought The Artist Has Ever Had. In Blue,” Sherlock muttered, and Irene snorted into her wine, latching onto him almost painfully as she struggled to stay upright.

“Oh my god!” she spluttered as she straightened back up, dabbing at her mouth. “You think we could get away with changing the title card?”

“Probably not,” Sherlock replied, shrugging as best he could with her weighing down his arm. “Unless you wanted to cause a distraction. Lose your top or something.”

“Oh, yeah, just what this party needs,” Irene murmured, nodding at a disturbingly young woman being towed along by a balding man. “More exposed breasts.”

Sherlock choked into his glass, a bit of wine burning down his throat as he inhaled it, and Irene thumped him hard on the back.

“Well,” she chirped when he’d regained his breath, “shall we make the rounds? I have to throw in a plug or two for the new research project the psychology department is starting up.”

“You started a new project?” Sherlock asked, not even bothering struggling as she straightened his tie, brushing down the lapels of his jacket.

“No,” Irene replied, grinning, “but I will be by the end of the night. Just keep the wives busy, alright? We’re playing it straight tonight!”

“I really wish you’d come up with a new catchphrase,” Sherlock grumbled, but had no choice but to follow along, summoning up smile after smile as he was towed through the philanthropists.

Two dinner invitations and three slipped mobile numbers later, Irene finally deigned to permit a snack break, and they scuttled over to the refreshments table, bickering over the hors d’oeuvres.

“It’s definitely artichoke,” she insisted, nodding as she chewed on the puff pastry appetizer.

“No,” Sherlock contested, shaking his head back, “it’s spinach. Spinach and feta. The art department always gets feta.”

“Those are the feta ones though,” Irene countered, pointing to a filo tart.

“No, that was chèvre.” Sherlock took another bite of the pastry, frowning thoughtfully. “Yeah, definitely spinach.”

“Yeah, okay, you might be right,” Irene murmured, tongue rolling over her teeth as she finished the morsel. “Artichoke doesn’t stick to my teeth like that. What about those bruschetta things?”

“Best avoided.”

Sherlock nearly gasped down the rest of his puff pastry, clearing his throat down at the ground to
regain his composure before he turned toward the voice, well-remembered and already setting his heart pounding.

“Unless you like sardines,” the man continued, looking over Sherlock’s shoulder to smile at Irene, whose shoes clicked at Sherlock’s back as she drew closer. His eyes then moved to Sherlock, twinkling over a bright smile, and Sherlock’s brain rattled to a halt.

It had been exactly five months, three days, and somewhere around 17 hours since Sherlock had last seen Dr. John Watson, but it had done nothing to dim the effect of him. It had only been a few weeks, Dr. Watson covering one of Sherlock’s classes last year while Professor Stamford was recovering from surgery, but they had been a long few weeks, at least for Sherlock, who had sat in the center three rows back repeating a constant mental reminder to breathe. Dr. Watson was 31, seven years older than Sherlock—who thought that was a completely reasonable age difference on the occasions he couldn’t help but consider it—with untidy blond hair, unfair blue eyes, and extremely odd taste in ties. Not that anyone spent too long looking at them, the man’s smile bright enough to shame the sun, and Sherlock’s tongue swelled up beneath the gaze, ushering in a potent reminder of meeting over rough drafts in the professor’s office—which was, more often than not, the corner table at the local coffee shop.

Sherlock had needed a lot of help with that paper. A lot of help.

“Sherlock,” the man greeted, bowing his head, and Sherlock almost missed his next words because holy shit he remembered Sherlock’s name! “How’ve you been? Last year going well so far?”

“I- Er-” Sherlock stammered, distracted by the tailored grey suit clinging just enough to hint at the man’s biceps. “Yeah, it’s-it’s going well,” he replied, nodding. “Um, and you, Professor?” he asked, voice rising shamefully, and he cleared his throat to steady it. “There was a-a conference, wasn’t there? In August?”

Dr. Watson chuckled, shaking his head as he swept his eyes over the ground. “I’m not your teacher anymore, Sherlock,” he said, smiling as he tipped his head up. “It’s just John now.”

Sherlock nearly whimpered, but at least his face seemed capable of keeping up appearances, and it twisted into a small smile.

“But, yeah, there was a conference. In Berlin. How did you remember that?” He tilted his head, brow furrowing inquisitively. “I think I only mentioned it once at…what, the second meeting? Third?”

“Fourth,” Sherlock murmured, wincing as Irene snorted beside him. “I had trouble finding sources,” he snapped, and Irene lifted her eyebrows before turning a bright smile to John.

“So glad I’ve outgrown that stage,” she said, brushing past Sherlock’s side to extend a hand. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Irene Adler.”

“John Watson,” he said, and then frowned as he pressed his palm to hers. “Irene Adler… Didn’t you have a paper published recently? Something about gender differences in brain activity during intercourse?”

Sherlock wasn’t sure what shocked him more: the stem of his wine glass not shattering in his hand, or the fact that he didn’t pass out.

“Yes,” Irene said, beaming as she pulled her hand away. “We’re all very proud of it.”

“You should be,” John affirmed with a nod. “My sister-in-law didn’t stop talking about it for days.
She’s a psychologist,” he added, looking to Sherlock again to include him.

“Oh, really?” Irene pressed, cradling her wine glass in her hand. “What specialty?”

“Mostly marriage counseling,” John replied, smiling proudly, “but, apparently, sex comes up a lot when she’s working with couples, so she’s always interested in what’s going on in the field.”

“Does she work here in the city?” Irene asked, and Sherlock cast a suspicious glance down at her, beginning to worry about her angle, but Irene remained as impassive as ever.

“No quite,” John replied, tipping his head. “Of course, they like to say so, but there’s a London address, and then there’s living in London, ya know?”

Irene laughed, nodding. “Indeed. I assume you live in the city then?”

“Yes!” John chirped. “Can’t imagine living anywhere else, to be honest. Even if A&E is a nightmare.”

“Oh, you’re a doctor?” Irene inquired, surprised. “Are you retired from teaching then?”

“Oh no, I’m no teacher,” John chuckled, waving the comment away with his hands. “I just filled in for a friend last semester. Sherlock was in my class.” He grinned over at Sherlock, who managed a polite smile, but it quickly collapsed when he looked back to Irene eyeing him curiously.

There was a loud laugh over to Sherlock’s left, and they all turned, John letting out a sigh.

“I suppose I should go,” he murmured, craning his neck at a group near the center of the room, a man Sherlock recognized as Professor Stamford stuck in the middle and looking decidedly uncomfortable. “Mike never has been any good at making an exit.” He smiled back at them, sending Sherlock’s stomach into a tailspin. “It was good seeing you, Sherlock,” he said, far too sincere for Sherlock’s own good, but he managed a nod back before John turned to Irene eyeing him curiously.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, nodding to them both before he left, weaving through the crowd to reach his friend’s side.

Sherlock just stood there, waiting for it, and it wasn’t long before Irene made a small speculative hum beside him. Sherlock rolled his eyes, sighing heavily. “What?”

“Nothing,” she chirped, shrugging. “I just thought you would have told me you were hot for teacher.”

Sherlock glared down at her, but he could feel a blush creeping up his neck, and Irene seemed to notice it too, her face blooming into a salacious grin.

“Just how much help did you need with citations?” she purred, giggling as Sherlock’s jaw stiffened, his head turning away. “Oh, you’ve got it bad, don’t you?” she said, eyes wide as Sherlock flicked a glance down to her. “Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Want-some!”

“Stop it!” Sherlock hissed, grabbing her arm as she cackled. “He’ll hear you!”

“So?” Irene spluttered, pulling her arm away, and then she leaned in, speaking softly up to
Sherlock’s face. “He’s clearly interested in you. You should go for it.”

Sherlock scoffed, shaking his head as he looked back across the room.

John was chatting amicably with a large group, one arm slung companionably around Mike as he rattled the man’s shoulders, clearly making some sort of joke if the smiles and laughs were any indication. His eyes were bright, his grin breathtaking, his suit ridiculous, and Sherlock was just… just…

“No,” he murmured, swallowing stiffly, “he’d never want me.”

Irene opened her mouth to argue, but Sherlock turned away, avoiding her piteous gaze.

“I-I’m not feeling all that well, I-I think it was the feta. Or the chèvre.” He slipped his hands into his pockets, backing away. “I’ll see you tomorrow, alright?” he muttered, barely waiting for Irene to nod before twisting on his soles and bolting for the door, dodging a bright-eyed divorcee in the coatroom as he grabbed his trench and left, pushing out into the biting autumn air.

Feet pounding down the pavement, heart thundering in his ears, his mobile was out before he reached the corner, text quickly tapped out and sent.

Coming over
SH

A few seconds later, a reply beeped through, the screen glowing over his face in the darkness.

I knew you couldn’t stay away

Sherlock clenched his hand around the plastic casing, thumb hovering to reply, and then gave it up with a sigh, slipping the phone into his pocket as he hunched his shoulders to the wind, shame settling heavily on them as he followed the familiar path to Victor’s flat.

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He pinched at the bridge of his nose, brain throbbing as he tried to focus down at the book in front of him. He shivered as yet another chill ran through his body, tugging his coat tighter around him while gritting his teeth in self-loathing, and then bowed back down toward his book, trying to blink the words into making sense.

“Careful,” said a voice from above him, and, though he jumped, there was also something instantly soothing about it, a warmth that finally reached his bones. John looked down at him, smiling sympathetically as Sherlock met his eyes. “You’ll go cross-eyed reading like that.”

Sherlock chuckled, leaning back and lifting his chin. “Is that your professional opinion?” he joked, and John laughed, moving toward the seat across the table.

“No,” he said, sitting down as he reached an arm across the wooden surface, depositing a paper cup of coffee in front of Sherlock’s various books, “but my prescription is most definitely caffeine.”

Sherlock blinked down at the cup, confused, and his befuddlement only grew when John lifted his own to his lips, looking out the front window of the small coffee shop.

He’d bought Sherlock coffee, which meant he must have seen him when he came in, before he ordered. He’d noticed him. John Watson had noticed him, and Sherlock instantly wondered if he also realized they were sitting at the corner table, their table.
In other news, Sherlock was apparently 13 again.

“Thank you,” Sherlock murmured, tentatively wrapping his fingers around the coffee, as if they might pass right through it and reveal this all to be a dream.

John shrugged, eyes still scanning out the window. “You looked like you could use it,” he replied, turning an easy smile back to Sherlock, who returned it over the lid as he drew in a sip.

He blinked, startled, and then pulled the cup away, staring down at the steam slowing unwinding from the top.

“Two sugars, right?” John asked, looking between Sherlock and the drink, a small crease of worry between his brows, but Sherlock nodded, smoothing it.

“Yeah, I just—” he muttered, and then wanted to stop, but John was looking at him expectantly now. “I’m surprised you remembered, is all.”

John grinned at him, Sherlock nearly dropping his coffee. “Of course, I remember,” he replied, leaning forward to fold his elbows on the table. “We spent enough time in here, after all.”

Sherlock chuckled along with John’s smile, and then quickly took another drink of his coffee for something to do with his hands.

“So,” John chirped, settling his cup down on the table, “where’d you run off to the other night?”

“Hmm?” Sherlock hummed, and John smiled.

“At the art fundraiser,” the blond clarified, and Sherlock blinked down to his textbook, worried John might somehow read the truth through his eyes if they kept meeting his. “You kinda disappeared.”

“Oh, yeah, I- I had a test to study for,” Sherlock lied feebly, twitching his lips in a smile.

“Oh?” John inquired, obliviously innocent. “That’s got you all-smiles this morning?” He flicked a glance over the detritus of Sherlock’s books, and Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head.

“No,” he said, looking down at his notes, “this is for a research paper. 20 pages.”

John cringed, eyes scanning over the mound of paper. “Ouch. Don’t envy you that, mate. Anything I can help with?” He scraped his chair closer across the floor, eagerly leaning over his elbows to peer upside-down at the words.

Sherlock blinked, mind working quickly as he remembered he was supposed to be horrible, simply dreadful at this whole paper-writing thing. “Oh, um, no, not-not right now,” he muttered, rattling his head. “I’ve barely started. Still figuring out sources.”

John hummed thoughtfully, leaning back away before pushing up to his feet. “Yeah, I’ve got a meeting to get to anyway. But, hey.” He pulled open a flap of his jacket, reaching a hand to an interior pocket and producing a white card. “Here’s my number and email address and such, in case you do need help. Or, ya know, even if you don’t—” he shrugged, card bobbing in the air—“and just wanna talk or whatever. Or you could always snag me in here.” He smiled as Sherlock slid the card from his fingers, his own trembling finely. “I’m here all the time. And I have nowhere to sit now that you stole my table.”

Sherlock laughed, a bright bubble of childish glee bursting in his chest. “Yeah, well,” he muttered with a shrug, “finders, keepers.”
John laughed, slowly backing away toward the door. “Fair enough,” he replied, and then just hovered there for a moment, smiling down at him. “Well,” he clipped, finally turning away, “I’ll see ya around.”

“Yeah,” Sherlock mumbled back, nodding as the man looked back over his shoulder, halfway out the door, “see ya.”

John smiled, bobbing his head at him, and then left, moving along down the pavement outside until he disappeared from view.

Sherlock watched him as long as he was able, and then turned his attention to the card in his hand, turning it over in his fingers. A slow smile stretched across his face, likely downright worrisome to onlookers, but Sherlock didn’t care, pulling out his mobile and snapping a picture of the card before adding the number to his contacts and stowing the slip of paper in his wallet. He opened a text message, added nothing but the photo and a recipient, and then just waited, placing the phone atop his book as he stared down at it.

Within a minute, the screen lit up, flashing with a somehow-still-attractive candid photo and a name, and Sherlock was already chuckling as he answered it.

“Hello?”

“TELL ME EVERYTHING!” Irene shrieked in his ear, and, though he had to pull the phone away a moment, he quickly obliged.

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“I’m sorry, come again?” John asked, rattling his head incredulously as he leaned across the table toward Sherlock.

Sherlock smiled sheepishly, shrugging. “Well, my parents never watched the originals, and I didn’t go to a lot of movies growing up.”

“But it’s *Star Wars!*” John bleated, looking at Sherlock like he’d just admitted to having an extra toe. “How have you been alive on this planet for longer than ten years and *not* seen *Star Wars*?”

Sherlock shrugged again, trying to get his shoulders to swallow up his head as he blushed. “I-I dunno, it just…never came up, I guess.”

“Bloody hell,” John breathed, slumping back in his chair as he gravely shook his head. “What a sad life you’ve lead.”

Sherlock chuckled, looking back down to his books. “Yeah, well, I don’t exactly have much time for films. Trying to graduate and all.”

“You’ll be fine,” John assured with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You’re probably the smartest person in all your classes. You were the smartest one in mine.”

Sherlock blinked up at him, mouth dropping open. “Really?” he squeaked, and John nodded, sending Sherlock rocketing straight up to the stratosphere.

“Don’t tell anyone I said that, though,” John immediately chided, tipping a finger at him. “Teachers aren’t supposed to play favorites.”

“You’re not a teacher anymore,” Sherlock quipped, and then his stomach flipped, figuring out he had
accidentally flirted a second before Sherlock’s brain caught on.

John merely frowned thoughtfully, however, tipping his head. “I suppose you’re right,” he mused, turning back to Sherlock with a flick of his eyebrows. “Well, then I can tell you that everyone else’s paper was a disaster.”

Sherlock laughed, pressing his pencil flat against his notebook, giving up on writing for the moment.

“Stupid mistakes too,” John said, hands waving in gesticulation. “Like, there is a place; they’re is ‘they are’. What is so difficult to grasp!?”

Sherlock lifted the backs of his fingers to his mouth, trying not to laugh too indecently for the public place.

“I mean, as if I didn’t see enough of human stupidity working at the A&E. I dread Guy Fawkes day now.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked, and John turned to him, raising his eyebrows.


Sherlock snorted, bowing his head down to his textbook and clamping a hand over his mouth as he shook with suppressed laughter. “How-How does that even-”

“Exactly!” John urged, throwing a hand out toward him, and Sherlock dissolved into laughter again, John smiling at him as he slowly remembered how to breathe.

They’d met several times since their first incidental meeting at the coffee shop, though Sherlock had yet to actually use John’s number. He was spending rather more time drinking coffee than normal, though, always timing it for roughly the same slot on the chance that John would be coming through, and, more often than not, he did see him, although, sometimes, he had to rush off for a shift or an emergency surgery. Sherlock tried very hard not to find that very attractive, but, really, he was only human. And John was a doctor. And smart and funny and gorgeous and attentive and, sometimes, when he smiled, it didn’t seem quite so impossible that he might like Sherlock a little bit too.

“It’s not like that all the time, though, right?” Sherlock inquired when he had control of himself again. “I mean, you still do it, so it can’t be all bad.”

“Oh, no, don’t get me wrong,” John urged, swallowing down a mouthful of coffee. “I love being a doctor; it’s all I ever wanted to do. It’s just a bit overwhelming sometimes too, ya know?”

Sherlock nodded, understanding the concept if not the specific circumstance.

“What about you?” John asked, tilting his head at him. “What do you wanna do when you get set lose on the ‘real world’?”

Sherlock chuckled, shrugging a shoulder as he tapped at the edge of his cup. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ll have a degree in chemistry,” he said with a tip of his head, “but…but I don’t know if that’s really what I want to do.”

“What do you wanna do then?” John asked, lifting one of his arms to cradle his chin in his palm.

“Yes, you do,” John chuckled, reaching across to nudge him lightly on the arm. “Come on, tell me. I promise I won’t laugh.”

Sherlock smiled hesitantly, but John only nodded, pushing him on. “Well, I- Okay, were you here for that bank heist a couple months ago? Or the kidnapping back in May?”

John frowned, thinking, and then slowly bobbed his head. “Yeah, I-I think so. Those two kids, right? Dad’s a stock broker or something?”

Sherlock nodded. “Well, I saw a report on the news about it. They were interviewing some of his coworkers, and I—” He hesitated, mouth sticking open as he peered across at John, but the blond lifted his eyebrows in prompt. “There was this one man. He-He was in the background, and, while the reporter was talking…” Sherlock shook his head with a small sigh. “I don’t know, something just didn’t seem right about it. So, I called the tip line”—John’s eyes widened, but he said nothing—“and eventually got ahold of the inspector on the case. He didn’t really believe me, but he said he’d look into it, and then, a few days later, I got a call that they’d brought the man in for interrogation, and he’d given up the entire plot.”

John blinked at him, lips parting in shock, but, still, he remained mute, so Sherlock barreled on, afraid he’d never start again if he stopped.

“They had to drag me in, of course;” he said, shrugging. “Make sure I wasn’t involved or anything. But, after that”—he looked down, watching his coffee swirling as he idly twisted the cup—“the inspector called me sometimes. Just to run some things by me or ask me to take a look at a case or two, but…well, I’m good at it.” He peeked at John through his lashes, but the man wasn’t laughing, just listening thoughtfully, and, softly, Sherlock continued. “I-I thought…if I could, I’d like to do something like that. Like a detective, sort of, but not officially. More like…a consultant.” He shrugged, swallowing down at his books. “It’s stupid, I guess, I just—”

“Don’t do that.”

Sherlock looked up, meeting John’s firm blue gaze.

“You’re not a freak, Sherlock,” he said, shaking his head lightly. “Not even close.” He continued smiling, and Sherlock continued staring, and then, suddenly, like the flick of a switch, they both seemed to recognize the situation, Sherlock’s stomach twisting as John’s smile slid away, expression growing unfocused as he looked over Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock tried to stay calm, stay entirely immobile, but he couldn’t entirely prevent the trembling breath that pushed out of him at the realization of their proximity, and John followed the sound with his eyes, blue landing on Sherlock’s lips.
The man then blinked, mouth snapping shut as he swallowed, and his hand disappeared, pulled back to his side as he leaned away. “I-I should go,” he muttered, looking anxiously around at nothing as he felt his pockets, sliding his mobile off the table and stowing it away. “I’m on call tonight.”

“Right,” Sherlock croaked, quickly clearing his throat as he tried to subtly suck in a few deep breaths. “I’ll, um… I’ll see ya around.”

“Yeah,” John clipped, jerking a quick nod before he turned away, but then he stopped, twisting back with a preparatory inhale. “Ya know, we don’t always have to meet here,” he muttered, looking uncharacteristically nervous as his eyes flitted between Sherlock and the table, an awkwardness that was strangely comforting. “Not that we meet here, I mean, usually we just both happen to be here.”

Sherlock smiled even as his chest constricted at the fallacy.

“But- But we could actually meet somewhere,” John continued, hands rolling somewhat aimlessly in the air, the faintest blush tinting the skin beneath his collar, and it was so incredibly unbelievable, Sherlock was certain he would change his mind any second, realize that Sherlock was not for him after all and make his escape, so, emboldened by panic, he managed to speak.

“Sure,” he said, maybe a little too quick, but John looked relieved, so it couldn’t have been that bad. “That would- Yeah,” he added, nodding as he gave in to a smile. “Yeah, we could.”

John grinned, and Sherlock had to bite his lip to keep from doing the same. “Okay,” he squeaked, nodding. “Okay.”

Sherlock sat still a long moment, cherishing the glow in his chest, and then snatched his mobile from under his notebook, finding John’s contact and forcing himself to be brave.

You’re something special too

He stared at it a moment, biting his lip and bobbing his foot in indecision, and then tapped send, immediately flipping the screen facedown onto the table as his stomach lurched. As long as he could wait later, he tilted the phone up off the surface, craning his neck down to peer at the screen.

1 New Message

Sherlock picked up the mobile, tapping frantically at the edges a moment before taking a breath and hitting open.

Sherlock? I can’t be sure because lots of people think I’m special.

Sherlock chuckled, lifting the phone up to his face with both hands, hiding his manic grin from the rest of the shop.

Lots of people?

I’m in very high demand
Clearly.

I’m kidding.

I know.

Do you though?

Sherlock chuckled, John embarrassingly insightful even through text, but, before Sherlock could reply, another message chimed through.

What are you doing Saturday?

November 1st?

That would be Saturday, yes

I thought you might mean next Saturday

No, that’s way too far away

Sherlock bit his lip, blushing downright absurdly for it only being words on a screen.

I’m not doing anything.

At all?

No

Could you be doing dinner at that Thai place on Gardner at 7?

An involuntary sound squeaked from his throat, and he looked around, catching no one’s eye but the nearby barista, who beamed at him like he was the most adorable thing she’d ever seen. He smiled tremulously at her, flushing hot all over, and then turned back to his phone.

I could be.

Great. Meet you there?

Sure

It’s a date.

Sherlock stared at the message. He stared, then looked out the window a moment, then checked it again, but it still said the same thing.

That was just a phrase, though, a saying. It was a date, Saturday was a date, November 1st was a date on a calendar. It wasn’t necessarily- John didn’t necessarily-

His phone beeped again, and he unthinkingly opened the message.

And that wasn’t figurative. In case you were wondering.

He lifted a hand to his mouth, biting hard on his thumb nail to prevent more public grinning.
I wasn’t.

Sure you weren’t

Don’t you have lives to save?

Yeah. Quick question though?

Will anyone die in the time it takes to ask?

Unlikely

Then sure

You didn’t really need help with that paper did you?

Sherlock’s eyes shot wide, his lips dropping open with a small pop, and it was lucky it was just texting, because his throat had closed up.

Which one? The one now or the one for your class?

Both

Sherlock bounced his heel against the floor, weighing his options, and then bet on the truth.

Maybe not quite as much as I let on

I figured

How?

Because Mike said you’d done just fine on your previous paper

Sherlock winced, the fact that Professor Stamford might have discussed his students with John beforehand not having occurred to him.

Ah

Yep

If a silence can be awkward when the two people talking weren’t in the room together, this one was, and Sherlock was just waffling over what excuse to make to no longer be able to talk when John swooped in with another message.

I’m glad you did though

Before Sherlock could even press his fingers to the screen, the phone chimed again.

Even if it does make you a liar

Sherlock laughed, settling back into his chair as he happily tapped away at the keyboard.

If it’s any consolation, I really didn’t know how to format footnotes

That was just the first meeting
I know

You're gonna be trouble, aren't you?

Sherlock chuckled, biting his lip down at the phone as he swiped out a reply.

I'm certainly going to try.

---

Sherlock made poor decisions when he was nervous, he always had. It wasn’t an emotion he was faced with often, and his coping mechanisms were infamously poor. His first day of school, he’d barricaded himself in a supply closet, refusing to come out for anyone but Mycroft, who had had to be brought over from the secondary school to coax him out. When he’d performed his first violin solo, he ate an entire box of chocolate biscuits the afternoon before, barely managing to play through the nausea. The icing on the proverbial cake, however, had been the night before he’d had to speak at his mother’s funeral, when he’d gone for a walk in the snow to clear his head, and ended up being found by Mrs. Hudson three hours later with a severe case of hypothermia and twigs inexplicably caught in his hair.

Tonight might give that cake a run for its money, though.

It was Halloween night, less than 24 hours before his date with John, and Sherlock didn’t even know where he was, only that he no longer wanted to be there. It had probably seemed like a good idea a few hours ago when he’d shot up, but, now that the euphoria was wearing off, he was remembering a few things, like how he didn’t like clubs, didn’t like Halloween, and especially didn’t like Victor Trevor.

“Where do ya wanna go now?” Victor asked, bumping into him as they walked down an alley, ambling toward a busy street. “There’s that gay bar downtown. That one’s a fancy dress party, but we could find costumes. Whadya wanna be? I’d vote fireman, personally.”

“I don’t really want-” he murmured, lifting a hand to his aching head, but Victor cut him off, rattling at his arm as he dragged him along.

“Come on, Sherls, the night is young!” The man then stopped, swooping around to Sherlock’s front and peering up into his eyes. “You crashin’? Need another hit?” he asked, already rummaging around in his coat.

“No, I-I have a…thing tomorrow,” he answered, shaking his head as he swallowed down shame. “I should go home.” He made to turn away, but Victor latched onto his arm, spinning him back.

“No, you don’t,” Victor chuckled, reaching for him again. “Not with this. Now, come on, hold still so I can find one of your tiny mutant veins.”

“Victor!” Sherlock snapped, jerking his arm away again, but he stumbled a bit, growing unsteady with building exhaustion.
“God, you’re cranky when you’re coming down,” Victor tutted, rattling his head as he stepped toward him, one eyebrow lifting as Sherlock backed away. “Playing hard to get?” he drawled, smirking, and Sherlock’s stomach roiled. “That’s alright, I don’t mind a chase.”

“Stop!” Sherlock snarled, pushing at the man’s chest as he made for him again. “I’m not going to some stupid party with you! Now get out of my way!”

Victor blinked at him, his green eyes shot black and glittering in the lamplight, but the shock quickly turned to anger, and he glared at Sherlock as he pressed closer again. “You ungrateful little-”

“Sherlock?”

All the sound left the world in a rush, colors bleeding together into a greyscale nothing as Sherlock shifted in slow motion, looking past Victor’s form to the figure silhouetted at the mouth of the alley, an unmistakable shadow drawing closer.

“That you?” John asked, coming into a strip of light from a mounted spotlight at the back of a club. His eyes shifted between Victor and Sherlock, the latter of which was still shrouded in shadow, but Sherlock could see the suspicion growing in John’s eyes as he scanned over Victor’s form.

Sherlock couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, and, in spite of the fact that it felt like his very blood was vibrating inside him, he couldn’t make himself move. He simply stared at John, openmouthed, every excuse he could think of being dismissed as soon as it flitted across his brain, and, slowly, it began to dawn on him there was no getting out of this. He’d found the end of the line.

“Who are you?” Victor snapped, a very dangerous move if the flash in John’s eyes was any indication.

“A friend,” he bit back, trying to push Victor aside, but the boy stubbornly stood his ground.

“Yeah, well, friend,” Victor sneered, and John’s jaw twitched, “we’re just fine here, alright? So why don’t you mind your own business.”

John levelled a look at him, the kind that you knew was the last thing some nameless man before you had seen. “He is my business,” he said icily, and Victor blinked, stepping back in cowardice.

After a moment, he huffed a laugh, a frail veneer of bravado. “Fine, mate,” he answered, lifting his palms to his shoulders as he sidled backward out of the way. “You can have him. He was draggin’ me down anyway.” He turned away, walking past John toward the street. “Later, Sherls,” he called over his shoulder, and John twisted his neck, watching the man leave before turning back to Sherlock.

He looked worried for a second, concerned, and his mouth opened in clear inquiry, but then he stopped, the dawning comprehension visible on his furrowing face, and there was nothing Sherlock could do but stand there, staring back even as he knew his eyes were betraying him. John didn’t shout like his father had, or cry like Mrs. Hudson, or even sigh at him with heavy disappointment like Mycroft. No, he did the worst thing imaginable, which was absolutely nothing, closing his mouth and setting his jaw, his eyes shining with a hurt and betrayal Sherlock had always hoped to spare him.

Sherlock dropped his face, blinking down at the ground, his throat thick and burning. He was acutely aware of everything in that moment, aware of the pulse leaping in his neck, the tremors rattling through his arms and quivering over his fingers, the slight laboring of his breaths, and he hated himself for it, hated himself for the weakness, the failure.
“John-” he began, but John lifted a hand, stopping him.

Slowly, he lowered it, eyes searching over Sherlock’s face, and then he softly shook his head, Sherlock wincing at the shockwave hitting him from John’s breaking heart. “What is it?” he asked, every bit Doctor Watson and not at all John, and Sherlock pressed his eyes shut, swallowing at the ground.

“Cocaine,” he croaked, and John looked up at the sky, a steadying breath heaving in and pushing out of him.

“Okay,” he breathed, nodding at the wall as he swallowed, “okay.” He lifted his hand toward Sherlock’s arm, as if to take it, and then paused, staring down at his fingers where they hovered over the fabric of his coat. “Come on,” he muttered, withdrawing his arm as he turned halfway back toward the street, “I live just around the corner. You should get inside.”

He took a step, and then waited, looking somewhere past Sherlock’s face, and, conversation apparently not welcome at the moment, Sherlock merely hung his head and followed.

John really did live just around the corner, but it felt like miles, the silence stretched thin and fragile between them. Sherlock snuck glances up at him whenever he could, but John was always looking steadily ahead, tension mounting in his shoulders more and more with every step, and, eventually, Sherlock couldn’t bear to look at him, head bowed to his feet as they climbed the stairs to John’s flat. The blond unlocked the door, pushing it open and ushering Sherlock ahead, and then followed, flicking a switch near the entrance.

It was a modest flat, the walls relatively plain and the furniture fairly simple, but it looked comfortable, and the windows at least looked out over the street instead of at the side of an adjacent building. The living room and kitchen were combined into one room, two doors standing ajar on the opposite wall, revealing slices of a bathroom and bedroom, and Sherlock hovered awkwardly near the edge of the sofa, not quite sure what he was welcome to touch.

“Are you allergic to anything?” John asked as he pulled off his jacket, draping it over the back of one of the chairs spread around the small dining table. “Any food or drink?”

Sherlock shook his head, but, considering John was avoiding his eyes, he cleared his throat to speak. “No,” he answered, shuffling awkwardly on the rug, “but you don’t have to-”

“Just sit down,” John interjected, turning his back to him as he headed into the kitchen.

Sherlock hovered, peering back behind him to the sofa, and then looked back to where John was searching through the fridge. “I-I can go home,” he said, and John’s hands stilled where they were reaching for a takeaway container. “It’s not far. And I can get a cab or-or something.”

“No,” John said, and, though there was nothing angry in his tone, there was nothing else either, and Sherlock flinched at the cold, “you’re staying here. You’ll crash soon, and I don’t want you passing out in a gutter.” He slammed the takeaway container on the counter with a little more force than necessary, the sound snapping out across the walls like a lash, and Sherlock’s eyes fluttered shut.

“John,” he tried to say, but it came out as a choked whispered.

The man heard him though, turning his head away, his jaw setting.

“John,” Sherlock said again, a little louder, but still strangled, and took a hesitant step forward across the floor, “I- I’m sorry, I-”
“How long?” John snapped, eyes finally turning to Sherlock’s, knocking the breath out of him with the furious pain they held.

“I-” Sherlock stammered, intending to play dumb, but a twitch of John’s jaw told him that would be ill-advised. “Three years,” he murmured, dropping his face to the floor. He heard John sigh in front of him, looking up just in time to see the man’s fist come down hard on the counter, rattling the very foundation.

“Why!!?” he bellowed, and Sherlock staggered back, eyes blown wide. “Why would you do something like this!? You, of all people, you!”

Sherlock blinked, shaking his head dazedly. “John,” he pleaded, but the man wasn’t going to be placated, rounding back to Sherlock’s side of the counter.

“What are you thinking!?” he shouted, arms flailing wildly through the air. “Has it even occurred to you what you’re doing? Do you even care that you’re throwing your life away?” His voice was so loud, Sherlock’s head so full, and the words echoed back to him in his father’s voice, shouting at Sherlock from his doorway until he’d grown hoarse.

Sherlock clenched his hands to fists, eyes narrowing back stubbornly. “I’m not throwing my life away!” he countered, and John scoffed. “I have it under control, okay? I’m fine!”

“You’re a drug addict!” John raged, and Sherlock winced, his composure cracking before he managed to patch up his mask.

“No, I’m not!” he snapped, and John rattled his head, hands on his hips as he looked away, incredulous. “I can stop! I stop all the time! Last year, I went six months without using!”

“But you went back, didn’t you?” John spat, and it cut through Sherlock like a knife. He narrowed his eyes, shooting a glare before stomping his way toward the door. “I’m going home,” he snarled, but John blocked his path, grabbing his outstretched arm before it could reach the handle, pushing Sherlock back inside.

“No, you’re not,” he assured, and it was every bit a threat. “You’re staying here. You are going to eat, sleep, and then, tomorrow, we are going to figure out what the fuck to do with you!”

“Let me go!” Sherlock cried, wrestling within the man’s arms, but John was right, he was growing weaker. “I don’t need your help!” Sherlock shrieked, thrusting his face into John’s, but the man didn’t so much as flinch. “And you can’t keep me here, so get off your white high horse and get out of my way!” He tried to push John aside—a hilariously feeble effort due to both the differences in their physiques, and the fact that his limbs were uselessly drug-addled—and the doctor caught him handily, pushing him back as he placed firm hands around his biceps.

“You’re not going anywhere!” he urged, rattling Sherlock a little in his grip. “You wouldn’t make it far anyway, and we both know it.”

“Let me go!” Sherlock cried, wrestling within the man’s arms, but John was right, he was growing weaker. “I don’t need you! I don’t need anyone, I-I’m fine, I- I-” He didn’t know when he’d started crying, only that tears were now tracking down his cheeks as he beat frailly at John’s chest, and, as he sucked in a gasp of a sob, John tugged him forward, pressing his face into the warm wool of his jumper.

“It’s okay,” John whispered into his hair, and Sherlock’s fingers dug into the grey fabric over his chest as his own body shook with sobs and tremors. “You’re okay. It’ll be alright.”
Suddenly, anger flared back up his chest—mood swings an expected side effect, but no less jarring every time they happened—and Sherlock was yanking himself free, pushing John back with a thrust of his palms. “Why do you care!” he shouted, breathing hard and heavy through the still-flowing tears. “Why? Pity? Poor little orphan addict Sherlock?”

“No!” John insisted, shaking his head as he stepped forward, holding his hands out to Sherlock, and Sherlock momentarily wondered what the spots on his shirt were before he remembered he had just been crying on him. “I don’t pity you, I just- Don’t you want more?”

Sherlock blinked, fury faltering in his confusion.

John lowered his hands, sighing as he looked out over the room, eyes reflecting the lampposts outside. “You’re- You’re better than this, Sherlock.” He shook his head, eyes pleading as they looked back to Sherlock’s. “You can do better, you deserve better. Don’t- Don’t you want that? What about your consulting thing?”

“Don’t,” Sherlock choked, rattling his head as he retreated a step, but John just matched it.

“You want to work for the Yard. You want to help people! You’ll never be able to do that if you-”

Sherlock laughed, broken and shattered and borderline hysterical, and John fell silent, watching him warily. “You think any of that matters? It was never going to happen! Ever! It was just a stupid dream!”

“How?” John pressed, moving closer still. “Why does it have to be a dream?”

Sherlock shook his head, dropping his eyes to the ground. “Because,” he shrugged, smiling miserably up at the blond. “I can’t help people. I mean, look at me?” he added as Sherlock tried to pull away, pushing harder on his chin to bring him back to center. “I’m just a freak. Always was.” He swallowed, blinking at the rug as it blurred. “I’m no good for anybody,” he whispered, shaking his head.

Footsteps thumped quick against the floor, and John’s socked feet came into view the second before his hands pressed to either side of Sherlock’s jaw, lifting his face to meet earnest blue eyes. “Don’t you say that,” he urged, breath whispering over Sherlock’s cheeks as he shook his head. “Don’t you ever say that! You are good. No, you are!” he added as Sherlock tried to pull away, pushing harder on his chin to bring him back to center. “You’re clever and funny and- Christ, Sherlock,” he breathed, eyes searching earnestly over his face as a hand shifted over his skin, sliding up his cheek to push his hair behind his ears. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered, and no insult Sherlock had ever been paid hurt quite so much as that. “You’re the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, the most brilliant person I have ever met, and I can’t- I can’t watch you do this to yourself.” He shook his head, thumb smearing away a tear from one of Sherlock’s cheekbones, and, though he saw it coming, saw the words string across John’s eyes the second before they came out, he was still nowhere near prepared. “I love you,” John swore, and it was like a punch to the stomach, Sherlock’s eyes pinching shut in pain. “I’ve loved you since you walked into that classroom and started keeping a tally in the corner of your notes of how many times Shannon used ‘like’ during her presentation.”

In spite of himself, Sherlock huffed a laugh, and John smiled, fingers twisting gently in his hair.

“I thought- I thought it would go away,” John continued, dropping his eyes. “I thought, once I left- I mean, I was your teacher, for chrissakes! But then, when I saw you at the art exhibit…” He trailed off, a slow breath hissing past his lips as he looked back to Sherlock, who couldn’t make himself look away. “You are something special, Sherlock Holmes,” he said, bobbing his head emphatically. “You’re good, and you’re going to do good. You just- You have to stop, Sherlock.”
Sherlock closed his eyes, swallowing hard, the feeling of John’s fingers combing through his curls simultaneously thrilling and slaughtering him.

“I can help you, I- We can find a rehab or a program or—something,” John continued, eyes pleading and determined, but Sherlock’s were empty. “We can figure it out, we can—Please, Sherlock.”

Sherlock peered up at John through damp lashes, nearly started to sob all over again at the agony on the man’s face.

“You have to stop. For yourself, for the Yard, for me, even,” he pressed, and Sherlock’s whole body shook with a trembling breath. “Because I can’t watch you do this to yourself.” He ran his hands through Sherlock’s hair, slowly sliding them down to cup at his jaw again. “I love you too much for that.”

For a long moment, Sherlock could do nothing but breathe, blinking down at the still-damp spots on John’s jumper, but, slowly, the numbness frosted over his chest, soothing the pain he couldn’t bear to feel, and he lifted his chin. Suddenly exhausted, he gently shook his head, John looking between his eyes, confusion slowly growing as he loosened his grip. “I’m sorry, John,” he whispered, lifting a hand to one of the man’s wrist, slowly pulling his shocked arms away, “but love doesn’t fix people.” He took a step away, John looking at him like his face was caught in the moment a knife was plunged into his chest. “It just makes them blind.”

John’s mouth trembled open with a soft gasp, but Sherlock didn’t give him a chance, moving briskly around the man toward the door.

“Wait!”

“John, I—”

“You’re not leaving.” John came up to his side, not restraining him, but his mere presence suggested Sherlock wouldn’t be permitted to turn that door handle. “You need to sleep, and, frankly, I don’t trust you to go home.”

Sherlock sighed, bowing his head, the door cool against his forehead as he pressed his skin to the wood. “John—”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock had never even heard him use that tone of voice before, but he knew there was no use arguing against it. Eyes averted, he turned back, and John beckoned him, walking toward the only bedroom. “I—I don’t need—” Sherlock contested, but John silenced him with a look, pushing open the door and waving Sherlock in ahead of him.

“I have extra sheets,” he said, eyes focused on the bed, “if you want.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, I’m—It’s fine.”

John bobbed a nod, walking to his dresser. He bent, sliding open the bottom drawer and rummaging around a moment before turning back. “Here,” he muttered, passing across a pair of blue plaid pajama trousers, along with a grey hoodie emblazoned with the Bart’s School of Medicine name and logo in navy. “Just get changed and lay down. I’ll bring you in some food in a bit.”

Sherlock took the clothing, cradling it atop his hands and trying to ignore the fact that they smelled like John. “Thank you,” he forced out, and John nodded, disappearing through the door with a soft
Sherlock sighed down to the edge of the mattress, pajamas resting on his lap. With gentle fingers, he traced over the edges of the letters, and then stood, stripping down and changing into the garb, the drawstring of the trousers pulled nearly as tight as it could go. He tugged at the hem of the hoodie, stretching the words down his chest, and an ironic thrill rushed through him at the sight, something so much a part of John wrapped around him like a shield. The sleeves were longer than his arms, his hands disappearing into the cuffs, and he lifted the bundles of fabric to his nose, inhaling the scent as tears pricked at the corners of his eyes.

John loved him. He loved him. Loved him without a lie in his eyes or a slight curl on his mouth, like the way Seb had. Loved him without any obligation, without any conditions, without the added weight of expectation his father’s love had always carried with it. John loved him for who he was, for who he had been, and for who he could be, but Sherlock wasn’t worthy, wasn’t ready to be worthy of that kind of unconditional care. He was jagged and bruised and contagious, and John was too precious to risk infecting. He thought Sherlock was good, and maybe, just maybe, he was, but John was still too good for him. Far, far too good.

The door opened, and Sherlock gasped, face popping up from behind the sweater to blink teary-eyed at the entrance.

John stood there, a statue holding a plate for a moment, eyes flicking over Sherlock’s face, his brows twitching with indecision. Then, suddenly, he moved, dropping the plate atop the dresser and lunging to Sherlock’s side in barely a blink. He threw his arms around him, pulling him tight to his chest, and whatever walls Sherlock had crumbled as he dug into John’s jumper, weeping into the wool. “Shh,” John soothed, stroking down the back of his curls as he carefully guided them onto the bed, shuffling over to allow Sherlock room to curl up at his side. “It’s gonna be alright. It’s gonna be alright,” he breathed warm over Sherlock’s forehead, and Sherlock could almost believe it, pressing tight against John’s chest as his legs bent up, folding atop the blond man’s until Sherlock was practically in his lap, turned on his side while John leaned against the wall.

“John,” Sherlock sobbed, shaking with withdrawal and tears all at once, because this was everything he’d ever wanted, everything he’d never dreamt would want him back, and he’d ruined it, tainted it with the darkness he let live inside him. “John, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry!”

“Shh, it’s okay,” John said, shifting to press a shaky kiss to Sherlock’s forehead, “it’s okay.”

And then, because he was here, because they were both here, and because, upon the sun rising tomorrow, everything would look every bit as ugly as it truly was, Sherlock lifted his chin, stretching up and pressing his lips to John’s in a salt-smeared kiss.

For a moment, John did nothing, and then, in a slight stiffening of his arms and tension in his lips, Sherlock could feel him about to push him away, but he couldn’t bear that, not now, so he moved up in John’s arms, bringing his face level and deepening the kiss as he slipped his hand into John’s hair. He knew John would worry, knew John would feel like he was stealing something, Sherlock’s condition being as it was, but it wasn’t anything Sherlock hadn’t been wanting to give for months, and he bit lightly on John’s bottom lip, hoping to provoke something, to let him know it was okay.

Tentatively, and horrifically slowly, John responded, pushing back against Sherlock’s lips as the hand already in Sherlock’s hair tightened.

Sherlock slid his tongue across the crease of John’s lips, and the man groaned, tugging Sherlock off-balance as he wrapped an arm around his waist. Sherlock toppled atop John’s chest with a gasp, temporarily losing control of the kiss, and he never quite got it back, John brutally licking into his
mouth as they panted through open-mouthed presses and painfully desperate pressure, but Sherlock didn’t care.

It was easy to lose himself in a kiss like this, in the slow slide of John’s tongue that tasted like the pancake batter he’d probably whipped up for Sherlock, in the bruises John was digging into his hip as he held Sherlock to him, in the pounding of his heart that he couldn’t entirely blame on the cocaine, but the cocaine was still there, and it crept in around the edges, exhausting him until he was panting like the last leg of a marathon, and John gradually slowed things down, kisses softer and farther apart as he gently eased Sherlock lower to rest his head atop his shoulder.

Sherlock slotted in at John’s side, chin tipped up so he could breathe in the scent of John’s neck as John stroked slow patterns over his back, pressure barely there through the thick of the sweatshirt. “John-” he murmured sleepily, but John shushed him, the hiss warm over Sherlock’s scalp.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered, kissing the corner of Sherlock’s forehead, and, even as he opened his mouth to argue, Sherlock did.

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People say there are fine lines between a lot of things: right and wrong, bravery and stupidity, genius and insanity. The one that no one ever talks about, however, is the line between being cowardly or noble, but, as Sherlock slipped out from beneath John’s arm in the wee hours of the morning, he couldn’t for the life of him say which side he was on.

He quietly changed back into his clothes, pausing for a few moments every time John stirred, and then folded John’s pajamas, placing them at the end of the bed. After a moment’s hesitation, he plucked back up the hoodie, pressing it to his nose before slinging it over his arm and moving back to the side of the bed.

John was asleep, his face illuminated by the constant glow of the streetlamp that permeated the thin curtains, looking even more tan than normal in the yellowish hue. His face was smooth, no worry creasing over it, and his chest rose and fall with the slow breaths of peaceful sleep as Sherlock watched over him, watery smile blooming on his face.

Gently, barely a whisper of a touch, Sherlock reached down, grazing a finger along the edge of John’s forehead, brushing a stray tuft of hair back into place. There were so many things he wanted to say, wanted the relief of putting into words even when John couldn’t hear him, but he didn’t deserve that yet, so, instead, he simply watched, staring down at the man who had told him he loved him, and Sherlock was going to earn the right to say it back.

After an untold amount of time, he left, sweatshirt cradled in his hands as he walked down the pavement in the pre-dawn light, texting a long-unused number he nevertheless knew would reply.

Can you make that call?

The amount of time it takes to roll over and pluck a phone off a nightstand later, the reply came in.

I thought you’d never ask, little brother.

---

Sherlock stood outside the door, hand poised to knock, and then he dropped it again, the eighth time that pantomime had played out. He dropped his neck, exhaling a long breath at his shoes, and then straightened up again, lifting his hand once more. He almost hit the wood that time—he was getting
closer every attempt—but faltered at the last moment, and let out a snarling sigh as he turned away, returning to pacing across the corridor. The sleeve of the sweatshirt in his hands came loose with his movements, and he tucked it back up, folding it back into formation with the remainder of the worn grey and blue bundle.

The hoodie was a little lighter than it had been the last time it was home, washed several times over the past month and change. The letters were peeling a bit around the edges, screen-printing beginning to chip and crack, but it was more comfortable than ever, the inside all worn smooth and the cuffs adequately stretched. Sherlock slowed to a stop, bowing his head to the stolen garment, and once again traced his fingers over the now-fuzzy edges of the lettering, garnering strength the same way he had all those countless days before.

Except, they weren’t exactly countless.

It had been 47 days, 16 hours, and eight minutes since he had last seen John Watson, since he had walked out the doctor’s flat door, onto Mycroft’s jet, and into a rehab center, where he had spent all the time in-between suffering through group therapy or counseling sessions until he could get back to his room and bury his face in the sweatshirt, an unfailing reminder of his purpose. The scent had waned in that time, but Sherlock could almost smell it now, wafting out from under the door he couldn’t manage to knock on, and he drew up straight again, charging back to the imposing slab of wood and lifting his hand.

Three taps, three flicks of his wrist and raps of his knuckles, and then he waited, fingers tightening around the letter he pulled from his pocket.

“Just a sec!” came a voice from inside, and Sherlock nearly fainted, the approaching footsteps thundering in his ears, the only sound in all the world.

The door swung open, the expectant face of John Watson appearing in the gap, but his polite smile quickly fell, hand slipping off the door in shock as he gaped. “Sherlock,” he breathed, blinking as if he could clear the mirage. “Wha-What-”

Sherlock had a speech planned, a very good speech that demanded instant forgiveness, but he forgot all of that now, and instead simply thrust the letter out toward the blond, who startled back from the rapid gesture. “Here,” he clipped, swallowing hard as he watched John’s fingers slowly take the envelope, comforted by the fact that he too was shaking.

John lifted the letter, frowning, and then his eyes caught on the logo printed on the envelope and widened. He looked up to Sherlock, stunned, and Sherlock made a small gesture with mostly his eyes, indicating he open it. Slowly, warily, John tore the top open, lifting out the handwritten letter, which shook in his grip as he read, his mouth moving soundlessly over certain passages until he finished, blinking back up at Sherlock over the page.

“I-I wasn’t sure you’d believe me,” Sherlock stammered, bowing his head, fingers instinctively twisting at the cuff of the sweatshirt even though he wasn’t wearing it, “and-and he was a colleague of yours. I thought you’d- I thought it might mean more. Coming from him.” He swallowed, eyes unable to hold John’s face for too long.

Every wrinkle of concentration on his forehead, every shade of blue in his eyes was exactly the same as Sherlock had held it in his mind, and it was almost overwhelming, the realization that, just as John hadn’t changed, Sherlock’s reaction to him hadn’t either, and he didn’t know how he would bear it if John rejected him now, if he never got to know all the little pieces of him he’d only guessed at over the past month and a half.
“You- You were in rehab,” John stated, breathless, pulse pounding in his neck as he looked back up at Sherlock.

Sherlock nodded, blinking at the back of the letter. “I-I left- Well…” He trailed off, tipping his head to the side, and the slight pinch around John’s eyes showed he understood. “I got back on Monday,” he explained, and John snapped his head up, no doubt wondering what had taken three days. “I-I added some classes to my winter schedule, so I can still graduate in the spring,” he began, mostly mumbling down to John’s hoodie. “And I talked to Lestrade. That’s the inspector. From Scotland Yard,” he added, glancing up, and John nodded, remembering. “I think he knows my brother, and there might have been a string or two pulled, but, after I graduate, he-he said I could help out there. Not officially or anything, but he’ll call. Bring over more cases.” He swallowed down at the ground, taking a breath, and then, slowly, lifted his eyes to John.

The man was staring at him, looking exceptionally torn, the letter still shaking in his hand. After a moment, he swallowed, setting his jaw. “You couldn’t call?” he asked, and Sherlock blinked his eyes away, looking down the corridor.

“I-” he started, and then just sighed, dropping his face again. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, shaking his head as he met John’s blue gaze. “I-I wanted to tell you, but I was worried- If I failed…” He broke off, closing his eyes as he blew out a shaky breath, trying to ease the knot growing in his throat enough to at least get the rest of this out. “I didn’t wanna let you down. Not again. And I- I thought…if you didn’t know…maybe it would be easier if I- if I couldn’t do it.”

John frowned, but there was something sympathetic about it, something that told Sherlock he wasn’t entirely wasting his breath.

He took a breath, and then dared step forward, not quite imposing, but close enough that John had to open the door a bit wider to give him room. “John, you were- You are the best thing that has ever happened to me,” he urged, shaking his head, and John blinked up at him, lips trembling around a gasp. “But I wasn’t ready, I wasn’t- I didn’t deserve you yet. And, honestly, I’m not sure if I ever will, but…if I don’t try…” His mouth moved around nothing a moment, eyes blinking back tears as John simply stared up at him, awestruck. “I know it’s been a while,” he continued softly, this the hardest part, the opening to the letdown, “and I know-I know a lot can change, a lot probably has changed, but- but you told me…you told me you loved me”—his voice broke, and something shattered in tandem on John’s face—“and I just- I wanted you to know…I love you.” He paused, watching John, and dared to hope as the man let out a sharp breath, his mouth curving in a faint smile as he ducked his head. “Even if everything is different now, even if it can’t ever be the same…I love you. And I-I wanted you to know that. Now that I can say it for real, now that…now that you can believe me.” He rattled over a breath, something like peace settling over his chest, a burden finally lifted, but the anxiety was still there, thrumming below the surface as he waited for judgment.

John did nothing but look at him for a long time, face shifting through a dozen different emotions as he scanned over Sherlock, trailing slowly down from his eyes while Sherlock didn’t dare breathe. He eventually settled on the sweatshirt in Sherlock’s hand, and blinked, head tilting in confusion. “You- You took that?” he asked, pointing vaguely toward the garment, and Sherlock nodded. “I thought I’d just lost it.”

“No, I- I wanted something,” Sherlock murmured, shrugging as he plucked at the fabric. “I know I shouldn’t’ve, but- Well,” he muttered, pushing the hoodie out toward the man, “you can have it back now. At any rate.”

John lifted his arms, moving his hands toward the grey cotton, and then paused, slowly withdrawing his arms to his sides as he shook his head. “No,” he said, smiling softly as his eyes moved back to
Sherlock’s, “you should keep it.”

Sherlock frowned, perplexed, eyes shifting between the sweatshirt and John’s smile with a slowly expanding bubble of glee in his chest, and John, watching him, grinned.

“The restaurant’s always cold,” he said, turning back to reach behind him, plucking a jacket off a coat rack inside the door.

“The…restaurant?” Sherlock murmured, shaking his head, and John smiled, tugging the door closed behind him as he moved out into the corridor.

“Yeah, you know, that Thai place on Gardner,” he said, adjusting the collar of his jacket, and Sherlock’s stomach flipped as John turned a beam up at him. “We had a date, remember?”

Sherlock blinked at him, almost wanting to ask, to check if he was sure, but there was no doubt in John’s eyes, no question, and, instead, Sherlock smiled. “Yeah,” he replied, nodding softly, “I suppose we did.”

John grinned a moment, and then dropped his head as he turned and started down the corridor. “You’re really late though,” he teased, and Sherlock laughed, falling into stride beside him.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he said, soft and solemn, and John tilted a sidelong smile up at him.

Gently, he reached across the space between them, fishing Sherlock’s hand out of his pocket and threading it with his own. “You already have,” he replied, smiling at Sherlock’s stunned stare, and, slowly, Sherlock beamed back.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to keep sending in prompts, either here or at my Tumblr!
Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** Can we have a johnloctober prompt fill in which they're already an established couple? - anonymous

**Prompt:** What if people see them acting cute together when they think no one is looking? - linniess

Molly, Mike, and Irene work at a coffee shop where John and Sherlock are their favorite regulars, the adorable couple that takes over the corner by the fire. They've watched the relationship grow from the ground up, rooting for them all the while, but, after the duo has an even bigger fight than usual, will they also have to watch the romance fall apart?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Autumn is the craziest time around any university campus. Midterms and papers pop up left, right, and center, with every professor determinedly forgetting you have other classes. Every club and society is still scrambling to finalize schedules and recruit new members, and the sports teams are everywhere, running drills in any bit of green space they can find, or just running, panting in packs down the pavement with muttered apologies to pedestrians.

Yes, it was most certainly crazy, but in a lively sort of way, the kind of thing that made you remember you were a part of a whole, the rest of the student body descending that downward spiral into nervous breakdowns right alongside you.

For Molly Hooper, however, autumn brought with it a few other things.

Molly Hooper was in her third year at Bart’s, and in her second year of working at the local coffee shop, The Cup. It was a cozy place, with mismatched chairs and wooden tables they couldn’t for the life of them make the same color, no matter how many times they stained them, and it always smelled like pumpkin spice this time of year. They made pumpkin everything—lattes, muffins, cupcakes, scones, cheesecakes—and, when Molly went home at night, she carried it with her, the scent caught up in her hair and soaked into her skin. She didn’t mind though, because the coffee shop was also the place she was reunited with her friends after the long summer, her coworkers Mike and Irene Adler.

For some reason, Molly always used Irene’s full name in her head, like she needed her presence distinguished even as a specter in Molly’s mind, but the woman was something else, a force of nature in red lipstick. She was only a few months older than Molly, but Molly still wanted to be her when she grew up.

Mike was a couple years above Molly, finishing up his last year of the medical program, and the kindest person she had ever met. It was Mike who had gotten her the job at the shop, or at least put her onto it, though she suspected he also put in a good word with the manager—Irene Adler, of course. It was also through Mike that Molly had gotten to know some of the regulars, who had, apparently, become rather infamous in the year before Molly had arrived.
The doctor and the detective, as they were still called even though everyone knew their names, always sat in the corner, always ordered the same thing, and always had the same fight: the detective insisting he didn’t want to sit by the fire, inevitably getting cold, and then making the doctor switch.

The doctor was Mike’s friend, fellow med student and rugby player John Watson. He too was in his last year, dark circles making almost constant homes under his eyes, but he always smiled brightly and thanked Molly when she handed him his drinks, and that’s the kind of thing that says a lot about a person.

The detective was no one’s friend, really. Not that they didn’t like him, but none of them had known him before he’d started coming into the café with John. Sherlock Holmes was also in his final year, though a year younger than John and going to Imperial for chemistry, but he never seemed the younger one, his manner always rather severe and imposing when he wasn’t looking at John.

It was apparently some story, from what Molly had gathered from Mike and Irene, who had been there to see the whole epic unfold the year before Molly had arrived.

As Molly had heard it, John—then in his third year—had already been a regular, sitting on the same red armchair he did now, frequently munching on biscuits and nodding off mid-chapter as he revised. One afternoon, John had brought Sherlock in with him, a man he’d introduced as a friend from secondary school who he’d run into that morning, and then, so the story goes, the detective just kept coming back with him.

It had been quite the romantic saga—or a nauseating cheese-fest, if you asked Irene—the two of them holed up in the corner every day, sometimes staying to close the place at night. Mike and Irene actually adjusted their shifts to be able to watch the whole thing play out, placing bets on when the duo would finally get their act together and realize that they looked at one another like the other had hung the stars, but, as it often is, such glances were always quickly averted the second someone started to look up. Instead—and Irene still got angry telling this part—they just leaned a little closer, talked a little longer, and smiled a little more for months, until, one day, they came in holding hands, and got a free slice of cheesecake out of it from Mike.

Now, two years later, nothing much had changed, including the free pastries—Mike passing across a biscotti or scone to whoever hadn’t stormed out after one of the couple’s legendary bickering battles—and the doctor and the detective had become just another thing Molly looked forward to, a constant in the season of change.

This morning, however, as she cleaned the spout on the milk steamer in preparation for the evening rush, something did change, a loud shout coming from the normally hushed corner.

“You what!?"

“Sherlock, calm down.”

“Calm down? Calm down!? Are you insane!?"

“Sherlock, can we just talk about this, please?”

“Oh, you wanna talk about it? Because I’d have thought that was the sort of thing we would’ve done before you joined the army!"

Molly fumbled with the cup in her hand, the clatter thankfully muffled by the rag she was using. The rest of the café was empty, thankfully, but that did make it rather difficult for Molly to muffle her footsteps as she shifted toward the edge of the counter, peering around the corner. She could only see...
the back of Sherlock’s body where he stood, shouting down at the side of John’s face she could see as the blond perched on the edge of the armchair, but the tone was easy enough to interpret, no facial expressions necessary.

“I told you,” John replied, tilting his head up to Sherlock, and Molly could see the strain in his eyes from here, “I haven’t joined anything yet. I just talked with the recruitment officer. He said he’d send me some materials, that’s all.”

“That’s not the point, John!” Sherlock blustered back, coat twisting around his legs as his arms sliced through the air. “You should’ve told me! You should’ve told me you were—were considering this!”

“I wanted to get all the information first,” John calmly replied, dropping his face back to the table in front of them.

“No, you didn’t! You just didn’t want me to try and talk you out of it!”

“Well, you would’ve.”

“Of course I would have, because it’s a stupid idea!”

John snapped narrowed eyes up at the brunette, his jaw setting stubbornly, and Molly quickly ducked back around the corner, making for the backroom.

“Mike!” she hissed as she entered, scanning across the shelves and ovens, and the man’s brunette head popped out from behind the flour.

“What?” he replied, and Molly shushed him, waving a hand to discourage his volume as she approached.

“They’re fighting,” she said earnestly, and Mike frowned out toward the door over her shoulder.

“John and Sherlock?” he asked, and Molly nodded. “Well, that’s alright,” he shrugged. “They’re always fighting. Just last week, they—”

“No, Mike, this is different!” Molly urged, latching a hand onto his arm. “This one’s bad!”

Mike’s brow furrowed, his eyes growing wary. “How bad?” he asked. “Like biscotti bad or scone bad?”

“Worse,” she said, and Mike’s eyes widened. “Much, much worse. Like, whole-plate-of-cupcakes worse.”

“Cupcakes?” Mike spluttered, eyes looking back to the door, frantic now. “You think this is cupcake-level? Seriously?” he pressed, and Molly nodded gravely.

“What about cupcakes?” Irene appeared through the back door, depositing a box on a table before coming up to Mike’s side.

“John and Sherlock are fighting,” Mike explained briefly over his shoulder, and Irene flashed a concerned look to the door.

“Biscotti or scone?” she asked, looking between them, and they both blinked away from her gaze. “Wait. Cupcakes… Are you saying—Is this a Code Cupcake!?”

Molly shrugged morosely up at Irene’s wide eyes, and the woman blew out a sigh, shaking her head sadly up at the door.
“Oh, Double D,” she mused, her own nickname for them.

“What happened, Molly?” Mike asked, and Irene’s eyes dropped to her as well, alert and expectant.

“I-I guess John talked to a recruitment officer. Got some information about going into the army,” she explained, and Mike nodded.

“Yeah, he was talking about maybe doing that after he graduated,” he said, and Molly bit her lip.

“Well, apparently, he wasn’t talking to Sherlock,” she murmured, and her audience’s lips dropped apart as they looked back out toward the door.

“Oh,” Mike breathed, while Irene just shook her head, “that is- Yeah, that is bad.”

Irene suddenly walked forward, pushing past Molly and toward the door.

“What are you doing?” Molly hissed, but Irene flicked a dismissive hand at her.

She paused at the door, hand pressed to the surface as she turned back over her shoulder to the two of them. “Are you coming or not?” she asked, and, after a small shared glance, Mike and Molly followed.

“There are other ways to pay off student loans!” Sherlock was shouting around the corner as they reemerged, hovering near the door to listen in case they needed to make a quick escape. “You don’t have to get shot at!”

“Where? Where would I get shot at? Sherlock, we’re not fighting a war right now; it’d be perfectly safe.”

“Yeah, if you joined the army for a day, but you have no way of knowing what will happen! Mycroft could start a war next weekend for fun!”

“Well, I’d hope you wouldn’t let him do that.”

“John!”

“What do you want me to say, Sherlock!? I don’t have the money, alright? I don’t have any other choice!”

“You still should’ve told me!”

“Why!? What good would it have done!?"

“Because we could’ve talked about it! Could’ve-Could’ve tried to figure something out!”

“How!?"

“I DON’T KNOW!!! …I don’t know, but- but I deserved a chance to try. To be included, at least. I-I thought- …It doesn’t matter.”

“No, Sherlock, wait, it does, I just-”

“No, it doesn’t. It doesn’t matter at all.”

“Sherlock.”
“What!?”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well...you’re a little late.”

“Sherlock! Sherlock, wait!”

But Sherlock didn’t wait, and they all ducked behind the espresso machine as he blew past, wrapping his scarf around his neck before bursting out into the cold, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

There was a sigh from in front of them, and, tentatively, they all rose back up, peering around the machine to see John standing there, shaking his head down at the ground as he ran a hand back through his hair. A moment later, he left, moving back to flop audibly back down into his chair, and the group stood up, exchanging worried glances.

Wordlessly, Mike slid open the pastry case, pulling out a vanilla cupcake—the vanilla buttercream frosting bedecked with a cherry drizzle and bat-shaped jimmies, giving it its holiday-themed named, ‘The Dracula’—and placing it atop a small plate. He handed it to Molly, who moved to the gate in the counter, lifting up the flap and ducking out into the shop.

She crossed around the outside of the counter, Mike and Irene hovering just out of sight from the corner, watching her nervously, and then stepped out toward the seating area, her footsteps deliberate to announce her approach.

John still didn’t look up though, head hanging in his hands where they were propped up on his knees, and it was only when she placed the plate on the table in front of him with a soft clink of glass that he shifted, hands slowly sliding down his cheeks as he looked up. He puffed a breath of sad laughter, and then tipped his head up to her, looking suddenly so much older. “That bad, huh?” he muttered, and Molly tried her best to smile.

No words seeming quite appropriate, she simply lowered her arm, giving John’s shoulder a small squeeze, and he smiled weakly up at her, passing her a small nod of gratitude as she pulled away.

She moved back behind the counter, immediately accosted by Mike and Irene.

“So?” Irene pressed eagerly. “How’s it look?”

Molly hung her head, shaking it down at the tile beneath their feet. “Might have to make it a chocolate cupcake,” she murmured, and they all fell silent, listening to the keyboard clicks from John’s phone, though no reply ever came.

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“We have to do something!”

“What?” Molly hissed, peering sidelong at Irene as she wiped out a mug.

“I don’t know,” Irene snapped, eyes flicking between Molly and the infamous corner, “but there has to be something! It’s been a week! If I have to look at those sad baby blues one more day, I’m gonna drag Sherlock down here myself!”

“You don’t even know where he lives,” Molly patiently sighed, this avenue being discussed before.

Irene didn’t falter, however, only narrowing her eyes and leaning in closer to hiss against Molly’s
Then I’ll run screaming around Imperial ‘til I find him! Seriously, this is ridiculous! I mean, yeah, John should’ve told him, but he’s not exactly helping matters by avoiding him. They’re never going to fix anything if they don’t talk!”

Molly chuckled, smiling teasingly across at Irene as the woman watched her warily. “You know, Irene, if I didn’t know better,” she mused, turning back to scrubbing at the mug in her hand, “I’d say you actually cared.”

Irene sniffed, and Molly smirked down at the ceramic. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffed. “I’m just tired of Doctor Downer sitting there watching the door all day. It’s creeping out the customers.”

“Oh, so you’re worried about the customers?” Molly mocked, and Irene crossed her arms.

“Of course,” she snapped.

“Okay,” Molly chirped, shrugging as she returned to her task, and then laughed as Irene slapped her on the arm.

“I’m heading to the back,” she said, moving toward the door. “Gotta check on that next batch of biscuits.”

“You might wanna hold off on that,” Molly called, lowering her mug to the counter as her eyes caught a flutter of black outside the door.

“Why?”

“Because the show’s about to start,” Molly hissed over her shoulder, watching as Sherlock neared the door, his head bowed, but that coat was unmistakable. “But, actually, you don’t care, so-”

“Move over,” Irene snarled, elbowing Molly aside so she too could see around the espresso machine, and Molly giggled a moment before Sherlock entered, the chiming of the bell bringing the entire shop to silence.

The brunette hesitated just inside the doorway, hands fidgeting around a manila folder in his hands, and then he strode forward, approaching the corner as Molly and Irene stealthily shuffled along after him, peeking up to watch the exchange.

John was sitting in his armchair, head bowed as he tapped a pencil mindlessly against the open page of a book, but he looked up at Sherlock’s approach, eyes widening and lips popping apart in recognition. “Sherlock!” he spluttered, but Sherlock cut him off, thrusting down the folder in his hand.

“Here,” he said, voice entirely calm, but his arm was shaking a bit, paper quivering in his grip.

John opened his mouth speculatively, but then closed it, moving his book to the table as he reached up to take the parcel. “What is it?” he asked, peeling the folder open on his lap, the top pages appearing to be some sort of chart and a spreadsheet, as far as Molly could tell.

“My proposal,” Sherlock replied, and John snapped his head up, his face no doubt the mirror of Molly and Irene’s as the latter let out a small gasp of surprise at her shoulder. Sherlock frowned, tilting his head down at John’s expression, and then he lifted his hands, waving them frantically. “No, no, not-not that!” he urged, rattling his head, and John relaxed, looking once again to the pages. “Who would put a bar chart in a marriage proposal?” Sherlock scoffed, and John tipped his head up at him, lifting his eyebrows. “Okay, fair enough,” Sherlock muttered, “but that’s not what this is.”
“What is it then?” John asked, turning over the pages, and then looked up, startled as Sherlock descended down to perch on the arm of his chair.

“It’s—it’s my proposal,” Sherlock muttered, twisting his hands in his lap, “for…for you to stay.”

“Sherlock,” John sighed, rolling his head up, but Sherlock turned toward him, calling his attention back with a flap of his hands.

“No, no, hear me out! Okay, so-so _here_”—he pointed to a spot on one of the pages—“is what your current monthly budget would be if everything stayed the same as it is now when the loans started coming in. It’s in the red, as you can see.”

“Yes, it’s _actually_ in red,” John remarked, waving a hand down at the page, and Sherlock glared at him. “Sorry,” John muttered, and Sherlock turned a page.

_This_ is what it would look like after a few very simple changes. As you can see.

“No red,” John said with a nod, and Sherlock gave him a flat look. “Alright, alright,” John sighed, shuffling up higher in his chair as leaned more attentively over the documents, “so, what changes?”

“Well,” Sherlock chirped, bending down as he stretched a hand across John to a page on the opposite side, and John looked up at him, blinking dazedly a moment.

“Blech,” Irene grumbled, and Molly elbowed her in the side.

“For starters, you’d have to move, which you wanted to do anyway, so that’s hardly an inconvenience. An old friend of the family, Mrs. Hudson, is the landlady on this property”—he peeled back a page, pointing at presumably the listing—“221B Baker Street, and she’s offered to give us a slight reduction on the rent.”

“Us?” John asked, and Sherlock paused, frowning down at him.

“I’m assuming from your perpetual texts and calls that you are _not_ inclined to terminate the relationship?” Sherlock questioned, and John opened his mouth, shaking his head.

“Er, no, I just—”

“Alright then. Moving on.” Sherlock pointed down again, John, belatedly, followed the gesture. “I talked to Lestrade,” Sherlock continued, and Molly turned to Irene, who shook her head, equally unfamiliar with the name, “and he said he could start paying us a small consulting fee, but that could grow over time, of course. There’s also that blog you’re running.”

“My blog?” John questioned, peering up at him. “How would that—”

“We could take on private cases,” Sherlock interjected. “I checked the comments. Even if we helped _half_ of them, we could make more than enough to get by.”

“But you didn’t wanna do that,” John countered, shaking his head. “I suggested it, and you said you’d sooner jump into the Thames starkers in January than talk face-to-face with someone who mixed up their ‘your’s and ‘you are’s.”

Irene snorted, grabbing onto Molly’s arm, and Molly barely managed to contain herself as well, clasping a hand to her mouth as she shook with suppressed laughter.

“I know what I said,” Sherlock snapped, a swallow moving down his throat, “and I’m still not
exactly *keen* on the idea, but—Well, I’m even *less* keen on you leaving.”

An involuntary squeak vibrating up Molly’s throat, and it was her turn to get an elbow to the ribs.

John opened his mouth in surprise, and then his expression softened, a fond smile spreading over his face. “Sherlock,” he breathed, but the man cut him off.

“No, wait, I’m not done. Here’s the money we could save if I got an Oyster card instead of taking cabs”—he pointed down to a spot on the spreadsheet before turning another page—“and *this* is what we’d save if we learned how to cook and stopped ordering takeaway.”

John looked up at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I didn’t factor that one into the budget, but it’s worth noting, I suppose, if things ever get desperate.” Sherlock pulled his hands back into his lap, twisting his fingers together as he bobbed his head down at the collection of files. “So, yeah, that’s—that’s pretty much all of it,” he murmured, eyes blinking down at his hands.

John searched over the pages, expression unreadable as his brow twitched and furrowed, and absolute silence fell, even Irene no longer breathing at Molly’s side. “You—You put all this together… for me?” he murmured, turning his face up.

Sherlock swallowed, and then shrugged, nodding vaguely as he avoided John’s eyes.

It was probably only a second, but it felt like an eternity, and Molly was preparing to have to tackle Irene before she jumped up and demanded a response when John, finally, grinned, Sherlock turning warily toward him.

“You are such a nerd,” John said, shaking his head, and Sherlock had just enough time to look offended before John pulled him down, toppling him into his lap as he caught the man’s mouth with his.

Molly dropped her eyes, giving them their privacy, but Irene only stood up further. “Irene!” Molly hissed, tugging at her sleeve.

“What?” Irene snapped back. “They have their eyes closed. Oh shit!” She dropped back down, and Molly lifted her eyes to find the couple had broken apart.

John brushed his hands through Sherlock’s hair, looking fondly over the man’s face as he nodded. “Okay,” he breathed, smiling softly, “okay.” He leant it to kiss him again, but Sherlock stopped him, hands pressing against his sternum.

“You’re going to have to be a little more precise,” he muttered, and John chuckled, dropping his head a moment as he shook it.

“I’ll stay. With you,” John said, and Sherlock’s lips trembled around a small gasp. “And—And I’m sorry,” the blond continued, expression faltering to regret a moment as he traced his thumb down Sherlock’s cheek. “You were right, I—I should’ve included you. I shouldn’t have just…gone off and—and done something like that without talking to you first. I just— I panicked or something, I don’t know, but— I never meant to hurt you, I—I love you, Sherlock. You have to know I—”

The rest of his speech remained unheard, and also unnecessary, and Irene and Molly ducked back behind the counter as Sherlock dropped down to John’s lips.

The two girls turned to lean against the cupboards, stretching their legs out in front of them, and Irene
let out a heavy sigh, her head thunking back against the wood. “Well, that was exhausting,” she muttered, and Molly chuckled.

“How?” she asked. “You didn’t have to do anything.”

“I had to watch,” Irene retorted, rolling her head to her, “and can also probably not eat anything for the next week.”

Molly laughed, shaking her head out in front of her as the door swung open to her right, Mike popping out around it.

He paused, a tray of biscuits in his hand, and looked down at them both, brow furrowing. “Why are you-” he started, but Molly and Irene hushed him with tandem hisses. Eyebrows raised, Mike placed the biscuits on the interior of the counter, and then bent down, voice dropping to a whisper. “Why are you on the floor?” he asked, looking between them.

“John and Sherlock just made up,” Molly explained, bobbing her head up and behind her, and Mike’s eyes followed the gesture as they widened. “John’s gonna stay. Sherlock worked a budget out and everything.”

“A budget?” Mike questioned, and they nodded.

“Yep,” Irene clipped, “it was disgusting.”

Molly laughed, Mike standing back up to peer carefully over the counter toward them.

When he turned back, his face was glowing with glee, and he quickly darted over to a shelf, snapping up a small plate.

“What are you doing?” Irene asked, but Molly just smiled, a guess already in mind.

“What else?” Mike said, beaming as he slid open the pastry case. “Cheesecake!”

Irene groaned, and Molly laughed, and Mike darted off around the corner to deliver the celebratory dessert, and everything was back to exactly how it should be.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m cold, move over.”

“But you wanted to be on that side!”

Molly grinned, shaking her head up at the ceiling.

Yes, exactly how it should be.
Sherlock didn’t know how he’d ended up here. Irene suggested things all the time, and he always managed to say no. Why he had thought this was the time to cave, that this was the time to give in to her goading, he would never know, but he most certainly regretted it.

The lights of the gay bar were only slightly less garish than the music as they illuminated the vibrating crowd Sherlock was staying far away from. The dance floor was full of people, a faceless mob of laughter and gyrating, all of them bedecked in costumes, and Sherlock hated every single one of them—vampire to fireman.

He groaned, turning away and heading back to the bar for some more liquid patience when Irene came up beside him, hanging off his arm and sprinkling him with glitter.

“Sherlock!” she cried, wobbling in her high black heels, the sheen of her cat suit reflecting the lights. “What are you doing hiding in the corner? Come on!” She tugged at his arm, rattling his head on his shoulders. “Come dance with me!”

“I’d rather not,” Sherlock muttered, slipping his arm away, and Irene pouted. “Why did you even bring me here? You know I don’t like clubs.”

“You don’t like anything,” Irene countered, and Sherlock glared at her, but brokered no argument. Irene laughed, leaning back in to his side. “You gotta loosen up, Sherlock!” she coaxed, reaching up to further unbutton his purple shirt, something she’d been trying to do all evening, but Sherlock pushed her hand away. “You’re always cooped up in that studio of yours. When’s the last time you got laid?”

“What!” Sherlock spluttered, rattling his head as he backed away from her. “Why are you- How is that-”

Irene sighed, shaking her head at him. “That long, huh?” she muttered, and Sherlock glared.

“I don’t have time for relationships,” Sherlock answered, spitting out the word with a sneer. “I’m busy. I have a show to put together.”

“That’s months away!” Irene cajoled. “And who said anything about a relationship? Just pick somebody up! We’re at a gay bar, for chrissake!”

“It’s only three months,” Sherlock reminded, and Irene rolled her eyes, “and I don’t need to ‘pick someone up’.”
Irene snorted. “More like you couldn’t.”

Sherlock glared at her, but Irene only lifted her eyebrows back. “I could,” he snapped, and she smirked. “I could! I just don’t see the point in it.”

“Mhmm,” Irene murmured skeptically. “Spoken like a true coward. Hey, I’m gonna run to the loo, can you get me another gin and tonic?” she asked, and then walked away, waggling her fingers back at him before he could reply.

Grumbling to himself, but with nothing better to do, Sherlock stomped over to the bar, sliding onto a stool and flicking his fingers at the bartender. “Gin and tonic and a martini,” he leaned up and nearly shouted to the man, who nodded and bustled away, leaving Sherlock to stare out at the pulsing dance floor once again, his own head pounding along with it. He almost didn’t notice as the bar vibrated beneath his arms, and may have written it off to the ungodly bass if not for the voice of a man suddenly shouting out from behind him.

“Can I get a whiskey? Neat?” the man called, and the bartender nodded, barely flicking a glance up from his work. The man then turned, leaning back against the bar on his elbows as he looked out over the dance floor with a tired sigh, and Sherlock took the moment to catalog him.

The man was blond, blue eyes looking out from within his tanned face. He was on the shorter side, but he carried himself with a strength the hints of muscle curving under his clothes could attest to, and he was also not wearing a costume, clad instead in simple dark jeans and a tight grey t-shirt. There was a watch on his right hand, a rather elaborate model in leather and silver, the kind of thing a workplace might give out for a milestone, but the man was young, only a few years older than Sherlock’s 27. He was also starting to turn his head, so Sherlock promptly looked away.

“Gin and tonic and a martini,” the bartender announced, dropping the drinks down in front of him, and Sherlock slid the money across to him before the man darted off.

There was a chuckle to his left, and Sherlock almost flinched, knowing he was about to be spoken to. “Rough night?” the man asked, forcing Sherlock to look at him. His smile was friendly, at least, and he wasn’t leering at Sherlock like most everyone else he had talked to that night, just bobbing his head toward the drinks in gesture.

Sherlock figured it wouldn’t hurt to respond, just to clear that up, at least. The man really did have very blue eyes. “They’re not both mine,” he said, and the man lifted a skeptical eyebrow. Sherlock opened his mouth to continue, but Irene swooped back at that moment, eliminating the need.

“Irene!” he blustered, turning around to where she was now walking past him, but the woman only tutted at him.

“Walk it off,” she snapped, waving a hand, and Sherlock’s gaped incredulously before his attention
was drawn away by Irene extending a hand to the stranger. “Irene Adler,” she said, and the man grinned, chuckling a little as he shook the proffered digits.

“John Watson,” the man replied, and Irene beamed even brighter.

“You know, it’s funny, I’ve actually never met a John,” she said, lightly shaking her head as she looked thoughtfully up to the ceiling. “How ‘bout you, Sherlock?” she asked, turning over her shoulder, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed warily. “You ever met a John?”

Sherlock opened his mouth to reply, and then closed it, frowning. “Is- Are you asking me about prostitutes?”

John barked a laugh, quickly covering it with the back of his hand, but Irene just glared.

“No,” she snipped, and Sherlock snapped his mouth closed at the deadly tone. She then turned back to John, smiling brightly once more. “So, John, what are you dressed as?” she asked, and John blinked, tilting his head.

“I’m sorry?” he asked, turning back to snag his whiskey off the bar as the bartender called it out.

“For the party,” Irene clarified, waving a hand to the dance floor. “What’s your costume?”

“Oh,” John chuckled, shaking his head as he swallowed, “no, I-I’m not wearing a costume. This is just regular old off-duty doctor.” He shrugged, waving his free hand idly over his chest, and then startled as Irene squealed with delight.

“Oh, a doctor, that’s so exciting! Isn’t that exciting, Sherlock?”

“Thrilling,” Sherlock muttered back, and Irene slapped him across the arm while John ducked a smile to the ground.

“Don’t mind him,” Irene said, leaning close as if she weren’t talking loud enough for Sherlock to hear. “He’s always like this. Can never leave the brooding artist bit at the office.”

“You’re an artist?” John asked, looking to Sherlock now, who, in spite of himself, flushed at the inquisitive glint in the man’s eyes.

Mutely, he nodded, and then opened his mouth, but Irene was quicker.

“Oh, yes,” she urged, nodding emphatically, and Sherlock looked up at her, quirking a brow. “He’s very good too. Has a gallery show coming up at the end of December.”

John was clearly suppressing a laugh, trying to smile politely at Irene, and then turned to Sherlock, his face relaxing into something a little more genuine. “What sort of artist?” he asked, and Sherlock leapt in ahead of Irene this time, her mouth beginning to open.

“I paint,” he said, and Irene flicked a small scowl at him over her shoulder.

“He also sketches,” she interjected, just having to get the last word, and Sherlock rolled his eyes, turning to his martini as John laughed.

“So, what brings ya here?” John asked, and, seeing as it was unclear exactly who he was talking to, Irene answered.

“A friend from work told me about the party,” she said, shrugging. “I thought it would be fun. Sherlock-”
“Didn’t,” Sherlock interjected, and John grinned, chuckling down into his whiskey.

“Yeah, I got dragged here too,” he said, tipping his head sympathetically. “My sister didn’t wanna go alone.”

“Oh, your sister?” Irene asked, slightly more interested now as she peered out over the dance floor, and Sherlock sipped at his martini to avoid snorting. “Which one’s she?”

“Um,” John murmured, stretching his neck and weaving side-to-side, “there. The Batgirl dancing with the nurse.”

Sherlock turned, finding the couple on the edge of the dance floor looking extremely unaware of anyone else’s presence.

“Which is why I’m now over here,” John chirped, tipping his whiskey glass at them, and Sherlock smiled, prompting one back from the blond.

“Oh, the zombie Dorothy is back!” Irene sputtered, swatting Sherlock on the arm excitedly for some unfathomable reason. “Quick, how do I look?” She plopped her drink on the bar, looking earnestly down into Sherlock’s eyes as she fidgeted at her hair.

“Er,” Sherlock murmured, looking her over, “fine?”

Irene clicked her tongue, narrowing her eyes as she rattled her head. “Come on, I’m serious! If you were a horny drunk lesbian, would you let me handcuff you to the bed?”

“Oh god!” Sherlock cried, turning back to his martini and taking a steadying swig as John bent double with laughter.

“It’s a simple question!” Irene snapped, and Sherlock drained the glass, slapping at the bar and motioning the bartender for another.

“And I’m not answering it,” he said, and Irene pouted at him. “Why would you ask me anyway? The only reason you brought me is because I’m gay.”

“Exactly!” Irene countered, flipping her arms out. “You’re supposed to know about things like this!”

“What, lesbians?” Sherlock asked, shaking his head incredulously. “Why would I know anything about lesbians? We have literally nothing in common.”

“If it helps,” John interjected, raising his hand to his shoulder, “I’m bi and I’d let you chain me to the bed.”

Sherlock just blinked at him, mouth dropping slightly, but Irene beamed.

“Thank you, John,” she crooned, flashing a glare at Sherlock.

“Don’t mention it,” John replied, tipping his head. “Better make your move, though,” he added, nodding to the dance floor over the top of his glass as he finished it, mimicking Sherlock’s gesture to the barman. “Looks like Rizzo’s circling your Dorothy.”

Irene snapped her head around, looking toward where a woman in a pink satin jacket was indeed dancing with the bloodied Dorothy. “Well we’ll just see about that,” she spat, swigging down the rest of her cocktail before slamming the empty glass down on the bar and weaving her way back into the throng.
John chuckled, shaking his head as he watched her. “She’s something else,” he muttered, leaning his back against the edge of the bar.

“That’s one way to put it,” Sherlock replied, and John laughed, turning around and slipping up onto the seat beside him as the bartender returned with both their drinks.

“You think she’s got a shot?” John asked, spinning on his stool to face Sherlock, his head turned toward the dance floor as he sipped.

“Irene?” Sherlock huffed, mirroring John’s position, their knees brushing slightly between their chairs. “She’s got a whole magazine,” he said, and John laughed, the both of them watching as Irene slipped in between the two dancers.

“Determined, isn’t she?” John murmured a while later, his drink nearly empty, Sherlock’s at least halfway there.

“Mhmm,” Sherlock hummed, swallowing his latest sip. “Irene always gets what she wants.”

“Funny,” John replied, his voice lilting in beckoning, and Sherlock looked to find a sidelong smirk, “we have that in common.”

Sherlock couldn’t quite restrain his reaction in time, the alcohol slowing his reflexes, and he felt his eyes widen a moment before he ducked his head back down to his drink, neck heating as John chuckled.

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The door of his flat was pushed closed with his body as John pinned him against it, his head spinning with alcohol.

He didn’t remember who had suggested they leave, or at what point he’d mentioned that his flat was nearby, but the buildup of sexual tension on the short walk here had been downright unbearable, the two of them keeping up simple conversation as Sherlock wondered if he was the only one affected. It didn’t appear so, however, and the smell of paint sobered Sherlock enough to appreciate it the first time John’s lips fell on his, pressing hard with delayed need.

John’s tongue was much more skilled that it ought to have been after all the whiskey Sherlock could taste on him, and Sherlock let out a truly embarrassing moan, or, at least, it would have been if it hadn’t prompted John to slip a knee between his legs, slotting their hips to thrust against the stretch of Sherlock’s trousers, his own grinding hard into Sherlock’s thigh.

Sherlock gasped, fingers gripping into John’s waist as his head swam dizzily, John painting a stripe over the roof of his mouth. The man then reached down, pulling their chests apart to slide a hand between them, his fingers tugging with small metallic clinks at Sherlock’s belt.

Sherlock, while no stranger to sex, had never had a one-night stand. He’d had two relationships, both of which were effectively just regular booty calls, but it was still a relationship, still the same person every time, though he doubted that had been true for his partners. Sherlock didn’t particularly care—sex had never held any grand emotional anything for him—but a one-night stand was different somehow, even though both of his previous relationship held the promise of ending just as abruptly every time Victor or Seb walked out. Here, there was no assumption of anything further from the get-go, no required questions or feigned interest, and Sherlock merely let himself be tugged along, physically pulled between surfaces as they stripped their way across Sherlock’s living room. By the time they reached the single bedroom, Sherlock guiding a bit here and there due to John not knowing
the layout, Sherlock was somehow only in his boxers, John’s shirt missing and zipper undone.

Sherlock had only a moment, a brief glance of tanned muscle and finely hair-dusted skin before he was toppled backward, pushed down onto his bed.

John’s eyes were dark as they looked down at him, Sherlock just beginning to grow self-conscious under the gaze when John looked away, making quick work of the rest of his clothes.

In spite of mentally commanding himself not to react, Sherlock couldn’t entirely help it when John slid his boxers away, stepping what might have been awkwardly out of the black fabric, but Sherlock couldn’t say for certain, not really paying attention. Clearly, it had been too long since he’d been laid, his reaction to John’s thick tanned cock nothing short of visceral, a swirling in his stomach accompanied by a twitch of his own length.

John—the bastard—noticed, eyes looking down to Sherlock’s shifting boxers before lifting to Sherlock’s gaze with a smug flick of his eyebrow, and Sherlock, more out of embarrassment than anything, rolled his eyes. John laughed, stepping forward with a light press to Sherlock’s thigh, encouraging him further up on the bed, and Sherlock complied, lifting his hips when John hooked onto the waistband of his boxers and pulled them free off his ankles.

What happened next was probably weird, although Sherlock, with his limited experience in such areas, couldn’t say for sure. He’d never thought of one-night stands as involving a lot of kissing, nothing so tender being given much time in the proceedings, but John kissed like Sherlock painted, thorough and earnest, like he was chasing something he couldn’t rest until he caught. He hovered over Sherlock’s body, propped up on his elbows as he licked into his mouth, and Sherlock wasn’t entirely sure what to do with his hands, resting them loosely over John’s back and waist, but then the man ground down on him, sliding their cocks together between their so drastically different bodies, and Sherlock’s fingers gripped hard, a gasp hitching out into John’s mouth.

John leaned back then, kneeling between Sherlock’s legs as he panted, hair mussed and lips flushed as his bright eyes shifted down Sherlock’s body to where his long, thin cock was leaking lazily onto his abdomen. With a small bite of his lips Sherlock found simultaneously flattering and maddening, he turned, leaning back to swipe his jeans off the floor. “Turn over,” he said, a light hand tapping at Sherlock’s hip, and it was a moment before Sherlock could comply, his mind rattled by the gruff depth of John’s voice.

On his elbows and knees, Sherlock could see nothing but the sheets beneath him, but he heard the packet open, the slight snap of plastic as John rolled on a condom. Another packet opened a moment later, and Sherlock suddenly stiffened, aware of how unprepared he was, how long it had been, but John’s hand came down on the small of his back, somehow soothing even though he didn’t speak. Sherlock blew out a soft breath, steadying himself, and, with a care likely cultivated from years of medical training, John let the side of his hand brush just slightly against the curve of Sherlock’s ass, a wordless warning before slick fingers circled over the ring of muscle.

Contrary to yet more of his one-night stand assumptions, John didn’t appear to be in a hurry, gently pressing and kneading at Sherlock until he could slide a finger inside, sending a shudder rocketing straight up Sherlock’s spine. He then shifted, clean hand coming to rest on Sherlock’s hip as he knelt, thighs occasionally brushing against Sherlock’s paler spread ones with a tingling graze. He worked Sherlock open incredibly intuitively, pausing after every added finger as Sherlock tensed, and then moving slowly, gently relaxing the muscle again. Whether drunk on the sex, the care, or the alcohol, Sherlock couldn’t say, but, regardless, he was a gasping, shaking, sweating mess by the time John slipped a third finger in, and he lost it completely when the man crooked them, finding Sherlock’s prostate with a precision that made him bite his lip to cut off a cry.
John let out a sigh behind him, a shaky thing that Sherlock was pleased to hear sounded almost as wrecked as he was, and then pulled his fingers away, Sherlock whimpering at the absence. John was quick to replace it, however, thighs pressing warm against Sherlock’s as he knelt, a blunt warmth nudging at Sherlock’s entrance.

He didn’t know how he knew John was waiting, maybe it was in the small twitch of his fingers on Sherlock’s hip or the tremble in his breath, but, however he did, Sherlock knew, and he collected his faculties enough to nod.

John didn’t hesitate after that, sliding into Sherlock almost torturously slow, his fingers coming up to grip into Sherlock’s hips as he pressed inside, and, though John had taken all the care in the world, Sherlock still gasped at the pressure, John’s cock thick and hard within him. When he bottomed out, hips flush against Sherlock, he paused, the both of them breathing in almost eerie tandem, the air in the room vibrating with their synchronized pants.

It was uncomfortable at first, there was no denying it, and Sherlock fought to stop fighting, to release the tension bearing down through his muscles, but then John’s hand moved again, just a small slide from Sherlock’s hip up to his waist before trailing back down again in a sweep over his spine, and it was suddenly easy, just as before. Gently, Sherlock rocked back, a tentative test, but John gasped above him, crumpling a bit as his fingers dug bruises into Sherlock’s hips, and Sherlock bit his lip around a smug smile.

John, however, not to be undone, gripped Sherlock hard, restricting his movement as he pulled nearly all the way out in a slow heated slide. He then thrust back in, snapping Sherlock’s hips to his, and Sherlock’s fingers clenched into the sheets, his throat clicking with a choked gasp.

Sherlock had thought he wasn’t a stranger to sex—he had surely had enough of it—but, if this was what sex was like for most people all the time, he had been so very far in the dark.

John’s hands held him fast, strong and firm on his hips as they cut off any attempt to orchestrate his own movement, John pushing and pulling him in time with his thrusts, but it didn’t feel the way it had before, didn’t feel like quite so much of an invasion, an oppression. Whereas the previous experiences—growing ever hazier with every slap of John’s hips—had felt like something being stripped, a breaking down of his body into mere parts to be utilized, sex with John was something being added, a combined climb building with the steadily rising pace of their breath.

Suddenly, John moved, shifting Sherlock down, his elbows sliding across the sheets, and the change of angle set John’s cock pounding against that bone-rattling spot deep inside him, sending Sherlock into a tailspin of gasps and white-knuckle grips on his sheets, nails possibly puncturing the cotton. John was relentless, Sherlock no longer able to remember his own name, let alone anyone else’s, but he had John’s down, and bit hard on his lip to keep it from spilling forth, that sort of thing definitely not appropriate for a one-night stand.

He wasn’t silent, however, cries and gasps leaping out with every impact, and he was just about to shift up and take himself in hand when John reached down, that same unsettling synchronicity passing between them, zipping across Sherlock’s skin like sheet lightning. He something between moaned and screamed as John stripped over his cock, rough and fast, his hand still slick, and Sherlock’s fingers clenched into the sheets, his throat clicking with a choked gasp. On an upstroke, John swirled over the tip, smearing Sherlock’s own liquid down his shaft, and that was it for him, his mouth snapping open in a soundless cry as he came, quivering against John’s body where it pressed warm atop him.

John groaned and then gasped, hand losing its rhythm on Sherlock’s cock as he pounded into him, wiping the sight from Sherlock’s eyes a moment as he twitched within him. Slowly, though it was
impossible to say how long it was exactly, John’s fingers loosened their grip on his hips and he leaned away, withdrawing in a slow pull that Sherlock nevertheless winced at. John trailed a hand down him in apology, fingers grazing cool through the heat over his ass and thigh, and then the bed shifted with the release of his weight, and Sherlock lowered himself back down to the mattress, turning halfway back before his heart abruptly quaked to a stop.

John stood at the foot of the bed, running a hand back through his hair, the damp blond strands hovering in the air a moment before slowing easing back down into position. His chest was still heaving from exertion, his cock slowly slackening within the red condom, and he panted down at the ground, blue eyes wide and blinking as if searching for something lost. He then swallowed, seeming to steady himself before looking back up to Sherlock, who was still having trouble finding enough air. “Bathroom?” he croaked, and then cleared his throat, but Sherlock didn’t make him repeat it, only nodding toward the door.

“Next door on the left,” he said, voice quavering a little, and John nodded, turning away and snapping up his clothes before moving out the door, Sherlock’s eyes dropping to the muscles shifting in his ass.

Once he heard the bathroom door click closed, Sherlock groaned, flopping down onto his back on the bed, careful to avoid the damp smears of sweat and cum. He pressed his hands into his eyes, breathing deeply and trying to talk himself out of the flutter in his chest, but, my god, John was beautiful. And even Sherlock knew thinking like that was against the rules.

Rattling the thoughts loose from his mind, he sat up, wincing a bit as he moved to standing, and then snatched his boxers up from the floor. The rest of his clothes, as well as John’s shirt, were out in the living room somewhere, but John would probably grab his, leaving Sherlock awkwardly half naked, so he went instead to his wardrobe, sliding out a couple drawers to fetch a pair of pajama trousers and a shirt. The grey jersey trousers hung low on his hips as he tied the drawstring, pulling the loose black V-neck over his head, and then he turned toward the door, the creak of the bathroom hinges sounding out softly over the flat. For a moment, he waited, expecting John to reappear, but there were only a handful of footsteps before the sound stopped, and Sherlock frowned, moving to the door.

The flat was dark, lit only by the streetlamps outside, their attention being otherwise occupied when they had entered, but it was enough light to see John’s silhouette, fully-clothed and shadowed against the wall to Sherlock’s left. Quietly, Sherlock moved to the lamp in the living room, twisting the dial to a click, and John startled, turning back to him in the igniting incandescent light.

“Sorry, I- I was just-” he stammered, waving a hand as he half-turned back to the clutter behind him, but Sherlock shook his head, halting the excuses.

“It’s fine,” he said, moving slowly to John’s side, and the blond looked at him sheepishly another moment before returning to looking out over the scene.

Sherlock had the money for a studio, somewhere else he could work on and house his paintings, but he had never liked the thought of it, them being locked away somewhere across town without him. Consequently, a nook of his flat that had likely been intended as a dining area, a clear corner adjacent to the open kitchen, had become his workspace, a splattered plastic tarp stretched tight across the floor. Finished paintings leaned against the shelves at the back wall, some of the more recent ones still resting on one of his three easels, and, at the forefront, was a blank canvas resting on its wooden stand, ready to be transformed.

John’s focus seemed to have been drawn by a painting Sherlock had finished some time ago, though it still rested on one of the easels, Sherlock not sure he would ever have the heart to lower it down
with its others. “It’s incredible,” he breathed, shaking his head at the picture, this one a portrait. “I mean, they all are—at least, what I can see of ‘em—but that…” He trailed away with an awed sigh. “It’s amazing! I didn’t think you-” He broke off, mouth stalling open as his eyes widened in horror, but Sherlock just chuckled, not needing to stretch his powers of deduction too far to finish the sentence.

“It’s okay,” he assured with a shrug, John peering up at him with shy skepticism. “Most everyone’s surprised. I guess I seem the modernist type. Covering myself in paint and body flopping onto a canvas.”

“Well, I wouldn’t quite go that far,” John replied, smiling up at him, “but I wouldn’t argue with your body being a work of art either.”

Sherlock flushed, blinking away from his gaze, and John chuckled, turning back to the painting.

“She’s beautiful,” he said softly, nodding at the woman in the picture, her long auburn hair caught up in a breeze, pale fingers lifting to keep it from obscuring her sparkling green eyes.

Sherlock chest constricted, but he still replied, something he hadn’t done concerning this topic in years. “Yes, she was,” he whispered, John turning up to him in his peripheral vision.

“You knew her?” John asked, and then immediately rattled his head, dropping his eyes as he backed a small step away. “Sorry, that—that was way too personal, I-”

“It’s fine, really,” Sherlock soothed, giving him a small smile as John continued to look torn. “I’m going to have to explain it anyway if I include it in the show. It’s my mother,” he explained, nodding to the portrait. “She-She died when I was very young. That’s one of the only memories I have of her.”

John looked back to the portrait, a certain sympathetic reverence in his gaze now. “You look like her,” he murmured, and Sherlock’s heart stuttered, eyes blinking in shock as he turned to look down at where John was still turned away. “In the eyes a bit,” he added, tilting his head thoughtfully at the painting, and Sherlock just watched him, dumbstruck at the fact that, of all the people he had ever known, John Watson was the first person to say that to him. “What was her name?” he asked, turning back to Sherlock now, who quickly schooled his expression into something less awed. “If-If you don’t mind my asking.”

John nodded down at the small purple flower held in the acrylic woman’s hand. “Her name was Violet.”

John smiled, looking back to the portrait a moment, and then something shifted palpably in the air around them, Sherlock feeling the withdrawal before John physically did it. “I-I should go,” he muttered, ambling backward, eyes downcast. “Work and-and whatnot.” He smiled weakly, and, for the faintest second, Sherlock thought he saw something cross his eyes, a reluctance that had Sherlock’s lips parting in invitation, but he didn’t want to ruin anything, didn’t want to cross any lines or break any rules his inexperience made him unaware of, so, instead, he merely nodded.

“I-I should go,” he replied, noncommittal enough that John could argue if he wanted, but the man didn’t, merely swiping his jacket up from where it had somehow ended up draped across Sherlock’s dark leather sofa.
“I’ll, um- I’ll see ya around,” John muttered, bobbing his jacket at Sherlock in an awkward gesture as he stalled at the door, hand outstretched behind him to the handle as he hovered.

“Er, yeah,” Sherlock answered, smiling weakly as he nodded, “see ya.”

John smiled back, equally strained, and then just stared at Sherlock a moment, his fingers twitching on the doorknob. “Right then,” he suddenly blurted, tearing his eyes away and wrenching the door open in one swift sweep, and the last thing Sherlock saw before it closed between them was the stiff set of John’s shoulders.

He blinked at the glossed maple, listening to John’s heavy footsteps until they disappeared, and then frowned perplexedly, his eyes inadvertently turning back to the portrait of his mother. He’d painted the eyes too well, too accurately, and he could almost feel her scorn, see the patronizing shake of her head as she looked across at him. “What?” he mumbled, shifting his weight awkwardly, his eyes flicking between hers and the door. “He said he had to go.”

His mother simply stared back at him, but he felt her eyebrow rising.

He huffed, rattling his head at the closed door. “It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s not like I’ll ever see him again,” he muttered, and, as he chanced a glance back at the smiling woman, she almost seemed to smirk.

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“Can I go home yet?”

“No!”

“But this is so boring!”

“Honestly, Sherlock, what are you, twelve?”

“And what are you, 70? Does anyone actually wear tweed anymore, or do they just pull it out for corpses?”

“Sherlock!”

Sherlock huffed, rolling his eyes as he crossed his arms, searching out over the room. “I don’t know why I have to be here,” he muttered, and Mycroft bowed his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose as he sighed.

“Because it is a fundraiser for the Holmes Foundation, and you are, unfortunately, a Holmes,” Mycroft replied, and Sherlock scoffed.

“What? he snapped, and Mycroft lifted a flat look to him.

“Because it is a fundraiser for the Holmes Foundation, and you are, unfortunately, a Holmes,” Mycroft replied, and Sherlock scoffed.

“Unfortunate for who?” he snapped, and Mycroft lifted a flat look to him.

“All of us,” he deadpanned, and Sherlock glared. “Just mingle a little bit more,” Mycroft said, plucking another hors d’oeuvre from a passing tray. “Then you can flutter on back to your studio,” he added scathingly, and Sherlock’s jaw clicked, watching as his brother began moving back out into the crowd.

“I’d be careful with those,” Sherlock snapped, nodding to the pastry in Mycroft’s hand as the man turned back. “You’ve gained five pounds since Halloween.”

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, twisting on his heels and stomping back into the fray.
Sherlock sighed, turning to look out the window behind him, his own face reflected dimly against the dark sky.

It was the annual awards banquet the Holmes Foundation for Cancer Research put on in early November, doling out commendations for special advances in the field. His mother had set up the foundation before her death from breast cancer 20 years ago, and they had kept it up ever since, donating money to hospitals all across the UK. The funds had taken a bit of a hit after their father died a few years back, people simply not wanting to donate the way they had before, but Mycroft had rallied, bringing them all back and then some. They had more money than ever now, and were thus able to make positive strides toward a cure, or whatever the token phrase of the evening was, Sherlock hadn’t bothered to pick up one of the pamphlets.

He hated going to these things, hated the fallacy of it, the cheesy smiles and flattery that Mycroft always said were the keys to success. Sherlock couldn’t do it, not comfortably, at least, not without feeling like he was trapped in some slimy second skin, so he would buy time, linger on the fringes and look wholly unapproachable until Mycroft let him go home. It was a tried and true method, a foolproof plan, and yet a fuzzy figure in a grey suit was approaching at his back, their features somewhat distorted by the reflection.

“Sherlock?” the person said, and Sherlock’s stomach plummeted through the floor.

Still, he had to turn, carefully schooling his expression to impassive as he did. “Victor,” he replied tonelessly, but the man beamed nonetheless.

“I thought that was you,” he said, and Sherlock sidestepped quickly away, avoiding that ridiculous cheek thing he always tried to do. Victor’s smile faltered a moment, but he quickly hitched it back up, champagne glass swinging in his hand as he laughed. “Oh, come now, Sherlock, you’re not still mad, are you?”

“Mad?” Sherlock asked, frowning, genuinely confused.

Victor chuckled, sidling up closer to him as Sherlock leaned his body away. “You know, about the way we…left things?” Victor prompted, lifting his brows, but Sherlock only tilted his head. Victor didn’t seem inclined to explain further, only smiling as he took a sip of his champagne. “I suppose there’s plenty of blame to go around though. But enough about that, how are you? It’s been...what, three years?”

“Almost four,” Sherlock said, a touch wistful for the missed milestone, and Victor’s eyes flashed, a temper he managed to hide from most everyone else.

The man quickly brushed it off though, his brilliantly blond hair not moving an inch as he tossed his head in a laugh, the strands seeming almost glued together. “Oh, you always were good for a laugh, Sherlock,” he said, reaching a hand out to touch at Sherlock’s crossed arms, though he dropped it as Sherlock narrowed his eyes at the digits. “Among other things,” he added with a wink as he took another sip.

Sherlock just sneered. “So, what brings you here, Victor?” he asked with false cheer. “Your father buy you a job in a hospital now?”

Victor’s jaw twitched, but he twisted his face into a smile as he chuckled thinly. “No, actually, I’m an accountant at Newham,” he said, back to jovial now that he was talking about himself. “Make my own money now. And quite a bit of it too.”

“Congratulations,” Sherlock deadpanned, and Victor blinked. “If you’ll excuse me, there are people I
really should-” he said, turning away, but Victor lunged forward, latching onto his arm and turning him back.

“Not so fast,” he snapped, still smiling, but his voice held that edge of threat Sherlock was more than familiar with. “We only just started talking, and it’s been such a long time. I’ve missed you, Sherls,” he added softly, a pantomime of shyness, and Sherlock couldn’t stop himself from cringing in disgust.

Had he ever believed this, or had he just been young and inexperienced enough not to care that every word out of Victor’s mouth was a silver-coated lie?

“And I miss Oasis, but, ya know, I think they’re broken up for good,” he clipped, tilting his head with a sarcastic smile as Victor’s mouth dropped open. “Now, you will excuse me.” He turned, but the smack of Victor’s shoe hit the tile as he lunged again, hand gripping tight over Sherlock’s forearm.

“Hey, I’m just trying to-”

“There you are!”

Sherlock turned, arm still caught in Victor’s grasp as they both looked to the newcomer, but Sherlock’s stomach already knew who it was, flipping at the voice.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” John urged, smiling brightly as he approached, looking every bit the part of knight in shining armor in a blue-grey suit and thin navy tie. His eyes, all the bluer for the apparel, twitched just slightly, an entire conversation passed across in the movement, and Sherlock straightened up, pulling his arm out from Victor’s hand with a sharp tug. “Sorry I’m late,” he sighed, shaking his head as he drew up to Sherlock’s side, standing just close enough to give off a very distinct impression, though the arm he wrapped around to rest on the small of Sherlock’s back surely would have clarified any lingering doubt, “surgery took longer than expected. Oh, hello!” John chirped, as if he’d only just noticed Victor standing there, something that clearly rankled the younger man. “Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. John Watson.” He pulled his hand out from Sherlock’s back and extended it, exuding nothing but charm, and Victor looked down at the palm curiously a moment before taking it.

“Victor Trevor,” he said, bobbing John’s hand, and then let the grip fall away, looking between the pair.

“Nice to meet you,” John said, still perfectly at ease, and still standing possessively close to Sherlock, something the artist would be happy to let continue. “So, how do you two know one another? Or did I interrupt the introductions?”

“No,” Sherlock interjected before Victor could snap up the opportunity, his eyes already glinting as he opened his mouth, “you didn’t interrupt. Victor’s an old friend from Imperial.”

“Oh, really?” John asked, frowning innocently between them. “Funny, I thought I knew all your friends.”

Sherlock’s mouth twitched as he looked down at him, and John responded with the subtlest quirk of a brow. “We lost touch after uni,“ Sherlock said, shifting back to wave at Victor, who was steadily reddening as his jaw tightened.

“Ah,” John mused, shaking his head sympathetically, “always happens that way, it seems. Still, how great that you two ran into one another again!” He beamed, looking between the two men, and
Sherlock had to bite hard at the inside of his cheek. “Say, you know what? Oh, but maybe I’m being presumptuous,” John muttered, biting his lip sheepishly up at Sherlock a moment. “But I was just thinking, you should come over sometime! I’m sure you two have a lot of catching up to do, and I’d love to hear some stories about what this one was like at uni.” He laughed, tossing a smile up at Sherlock as he wrapped an arm around his waist, and Sherlock tried to look appropriately chagrined. “Flat’s a bit of a mess right now though, what with the big gallery show coming up,” John added with a small shrug. “Paint everywhere. Found some on my pillow the other day! But, that’s the price you pay, I suppose,” he sighed, looking up at Sherlock so fondly, it hurt to be a lie. “But, anyway,” he muttered, rattling his head back to Victor, “maybe after that? Say…early January? If you’ll still be in town, that is.” He watched Victor expectantly, the man opening and closing his mouth like a dying fish.

“I-I’m not- I’m not sure,” he stammered, blinking between John and Sherlock, but John merely smiled, swatting a hand at him.

“No need to figure it out right now. I’m sure we’ll meet again at one of these things before then. Afraid I’m gonna have to steal him away right now, though,” John said, hooking onto Sherlock’s arm with a regretful tip of his head, and then looked up to Sherlock’s eyes. “I barely avoided Mrs. Connelly on the way in, and you know I hate to talk to her alone; she likes you so much better.” He turned, pulling Sherlock along at his side. “It was great talking with you!” he tossed over his shoulder to Victor, who was still staring at them openmouthed.

“Yeah, you-you too,” he murmured, waving weakly before they disappeared into the crowd, blocking him from view.

“Where’s your white horse?” Sherlock murmured, tipping his head down to where John still held him lightly by the elbow.

“In my other suit,” John quipped, grinning up at him, and Sherlock laughed.

They made it to the other side of the room before John pulled away, Sherlock’s skin cold at the absence. “So, ex?” John asked, and Sherlock nodded, flicking a glance back to where they’d left Victor, though he could not have seen him through the crowd.

“Is it that obvious?” Sherlock muttered, and John snorted.

“From the way he was drooling all over you? Yeah, it was pretty obvious,” John snapped, following Sherlock’s gaze with narrowed eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock asked, and John looked back to him, blinking.

“Er, I’m a doctor,” John murmured, lifting a brow at him. “Don’t you remember?”

“No, I mean you’re not on the list of award recipients,” Sherlock answered, and John opened his mouth in comprehension as he nodded.

“Oh, right. Yeah, my friend wanted moral support. Mike Stamford?”

Sherlock nodded, the oncologist’s name familiar. “Right. Something with kids, correct?” he asked, and John bobbed a nod, smiling proudly.

“Yeah, his research was on childhood leukemia. What are you doing here?”

“It’s my fundraiser,” Sherlock replied, and John’s eyes widened. “Well, sort of. More my brother’s than mine now, but my mother started it.”
John nodded, eyes scanning thoughtfully over the ground. “Violet. Violet Holmes, yeah, there was a write-up about her on the way in.” He looked up at Sherlock, tilting his head. “I didn’t know you were loaded.”

“Well, it’s not exactly the kind of thing you advertise,” Sherlock muttered, and John lifted his eyebrows, tipping his head in acknowledgement of the point.

“So, Sherlock Holmes, huh?” he said, looking up at Sherlock with a small smile, and Sherlock nodded. “Well, alright then,” he murmured with a brisk nod. “Probably best I know your surname, seeing as we’re stuck together for the evening.”

“We- What?” Sherlock questioned, and John flicked a glance over his shoulder before leaning in. “My eight o’clock,” he whispered, and Sherlock, subtly as he could, looked to find Victor hovering at the fringes of the crowd, snatching up a bacon-wrapped scallop with rather more ire than the seafood merited.

“Oh,” Sherlock drawled, his heart sinking, but John just chuckled. “Well, don’t sound too thrilled about it,” he muttered, and, though he was still smiling, there was a slight pinch around his eyes that prompted Sherlock to speech.

“No, I- I didn’t mean you! I’m fine spending the night with you!” he insisted, and then promptly shut his mouth, John chuckling at the accidental entendre.

“We should probably stay at the banquet at least a little longer,” he joked, smiling even broader as Sherlock flushed. “I really did just get here.” His eyes caught on something over Sherlock’s shoulder, promptly widening in horror. “And there really is a Mrs. Connelly and I need you to be my boyfriend.”

“What?” Sherlock spluttered, John’s frantic mutterings taking a moment to process, but John waved a hand at him, hissing him silent. “Every event we’re at, she follows me around the whole night, and I would really rather not be pulling her hand off my thigh for the next three hours, so we’ve been together six months, we’re nauseatingly happy, and, if she asks for the how we met story, just nod at whatever I say.” He lifted his brows at Sherlock, expectant, but Sherlock could only blink. “I- What?”

“Shh, here she comes!” John hissed with another glance over Sherlock’s back. “Look alive, soldier! Mrs. Connelly!” he suddenly crooned, breaking into a breathtaking smile that made Sherlock rather sympathetic to the woman’s plight. “How are you?”

The woman—at least ten years older than John, with dyed red hair and enthusiastic blue makeup—giggled, high-pitched and girlish, and Sherlock quickly suppressed a wince. “Oh, fine, dear. Just fine.” Her eyes then drifted up to Sherlock, who quickly feigned polite interest as he smiled. “Who’s your friend?” she asked, eyes flitting up and down him again, and Sherlock was suddenly entirely on board with this plan.

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“Sherlock Holmes,” he said, extending a hand, which the woman eagerly took. “Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Connelly. John’s told me so much about you. Though,” he added, leaning down to her as he dropped his voice conspiratorially, “I would have been a bit more jealous if I’d known you were this stunning.”
Mrs. Connelly giggled again, pulling her hand back, but then the implication hit her, her eyes flickering uncertainly between them, and Sherlock chanced a brief glance at John, whose barely there smirk couldn’t have said ‘well played’ any clearer if he’d spoken it.

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Sherlock dipped his brush into the red, dabbing it across the page as he blended the fabric of a young boy’s scarf. He was sitting at his easel, working on the latest piece for his show, the bedroom door firmly shut behind him so no light from the living room would leak in.

It had been a long night, although one of the best in Sherlock’s memory. He hadn’t expected to enjoy pretending to be in a relationship with John quite as much as he had, but it had been, as it turned out, highly informative. Even when they weren’t lying to various philanthropists, they would talk, just the two of them, and the hours had passed easily between them, ending in a late night stop for a slice of pizza—banquet food was notoriously horrible—before, naturally, returning to Sherlock’s flat to work off said slice of pizza.

It was more than that though, dangerously more than that, and Sherlock could feel it even now, a creeping sense of dread as he turned back to the bedroom door, where John had fallen asleep and Sherlock hadn’t had the heart to wake him.

John Watson was a cardiovascular surgeon at St. Bartholomew’s, where he had practiced since graduating from the affiliated medical school. He was 30—just barely, as he said—had lived in London since moving there with his mother after his father’s death, had never married, lived in a small flat near the hospital, was allergic to cats, liked cherries but hated cherry-flavored anything, had a ring of gold within the blue of his eyes, and was rapidly becoming far too important to one Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock sighed, settling the brush on the edge of his easel as he stood, stretching his back before he moved to the table, snapping up his sketchbook and flipping through the pages. He needed at least one more piece for his showing, and he scanned through the pictures, searching for one that would fit. He had a sketchbook with him all the time, capturing little moments here and there around London, which was what the theme of the show was going to be. He had to pick just the right one though, the perfect piece to round them all out, but his search was temporarily cut short as the bedroom door opened, John emerging—fully-clothed, Sherlock noted—with a hiss and an arm flung over his eyes.

“Bloody hell” he croaked, voice still sleep-warped, “where am I, heaven?”

Sherlock chuckled, moving to the dimmer and lowering the overhead lights. “Sorry,” he said, smiling at the blinking man, “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t.” John said, yawning, “but you didn’t have to let me sleep.”

“You had a long day,” Sherlock replied, shrugging, John’s surgery having also turned out to be a factual portion of their ruse.

John looked at him strangely, and then blinked, rattling his head. “Yeah, I- I guess I did.” He crossed the room, socked feet padding from the wood onto the crinkling plastic tarp. “New piece?” he asked, peering down at the canvas, and Sherlock nodded, moving to his side as he found the appropriate page in his sketchbook.

He passed it across to John, a smaller black-and-white version of what the painting would become, and John held it gently in his hands, lips parted as his eyes scanned over the pencil scratchings.
“Sherlock, this—this is—Do you mind?” he asked, stopping halfway through turning another page, and Sherlock shook his head. “These are incredible!” he breathed, slowly flipping through the book. “I—How do you even find the time?”


John nodded thoughtfully, continuing to peruse the drawings. “Why do you only draw people?” he asked after a time, looking sidelong up at Sherlock. “I mean, not that you shouldn’t, because they’re great, but why do you?”

Sherlock blinked, frowning, never having considered that particular question before. “I—I don’t know,” he murmured, peering over John’s shoulder at the pieces. “I suppose, I just— I know people,” he said finally, but it felt right. “I sort of— I see things in them. Little things. Their joy, their sadness. If you look hard enough, and long enough, there’s always something hiding below the surface.” He looked back to John, finding the man watching him, his eyes fixed on Sherlock’s face. “What?” Sherloks murmered, growing uncomfortable under the steady gaze, and John blinked, almost as if startled out of a trance.

“Nothing, I— I just—” He cleared his throat, closing the sketchbook. “I was just wondering,” he said, handing the book back up to Sherlock before meeting his eyes again, “if you can see all that in people…what do you see in me?”

Sherlock’s lips dropped apart, but he could not find the words, was not sure John would want to hear them anyway, but he couldn’t say nothing, not with John looking at him like that, like Sherlock was supposed to say something in particular he could not even begin to guess at. “I—I” he stammered, and then backed away, breaking the moment as he looked down John’s body. “You’re leaving?” he asked, but he supposed it was also something of an answer.

John smiled, something sad around the edges of it as he dropped his head, nodding to the ground. “Yeah, I—I have an early morning,” he muttered, looking back to Sherlock, the two of them caught immobile a moment before John moved toward the door. “I’ll, um— I’ll—”

“See ya around,” Sherlock finished, his own smile probably less than authentic.

John huffed a small laugh, looking down to the ground as he grasped the handle. “Yeah,” he said, lifting his eyes with a nod. “See ya around.” And then he was gone, the door pulled closed with a soft click behind him.

Sherlock sighed, wilting back down to his stool as he cradled his head in his hands.

It was careless, and he knew it, had known it from the beginning, but, in his defense, he had never thought it would actually happen. Everyone knew not to develop feelings for people where it was supposed to be just sex, but Sherlock had never had feelings for anyone in his entire life! How was he supposed to know John Watson would ruin everything? But now, here he was, the only person Sherlock could so much as tolerate for more than ten minutes, and Sherlock had had to ruin any chance he had by trying to do a one-night stand. He could’ve just waited, met John at the charity fundraiser and had a fantastic time, maybe even the same fantastic time, but John wouldn’t have left, and Sherlock wouldn’t be alone. Again.

Leaning his head back, he stared up at the ceiling, a hollow pit in his stomach as he realized just how dire the situation was. He didn’t have John’s number, or even so much as an email address. John knew where he lived, yes, but how likely was it that John would be interested in pursuing a proper
relationship with him? The thought was laughable, but that was really his only hope at this point, unless he happened to run into John again. And when would that even be: a week, a month, a year? He supposed he could always develop a heart condition and get admitted to St. Bart’s, but that seemed a little dramatic, even for him.

Sherlock closed his eyes, blowing a sigh to the ceiling. No, there was no hope for it.

He was in love with John Watson, and John Watson was merely passing through.

---

Two weeks later, the knock came to the door.

Sherlock looked up from his painting, now nearly finished, and frowned toward the entrance, not having expected anyone. It was late, later than even his crazy upstairs neighbor Jim came to call about his latest missing cat, so Sherlock approached the door warily, leaning in close to the polished maple. “Hello?” he asked, and the response was immediate.

“Sherlock!” came a relieved gasp, and Sherlock wrenched the door open, John Watson shaking on his doorstep. “I—I thought you might be out,” he said, eyes bloodshot and blinking, and Sherlock searched over him, face furrowing in concern.

“John, what—what are you—” he started to ask, but was cut off as John lunged at him, grabbing him by the neck of his t-shirt and pulling his mouth to his. He was fine with kissing John—much more than fine with kissing John, really—but there was something wrong, something in the faint quiver of John’s fingers against his sternum and the added breathlessness of his lips. “Wait,” he murmured, trying to break out from under John’s mouth as John kicked the door closed behind him, shrugging out of his coat as he started pushing Sherlock back toward the bedroom. “Wait, John— What— What’s wrong, why—why are you— John!?” Sherlock finally shouted, pushing the man away as he held him by the shoulders.

“What!” John spouted, chest heaving, but it was his eyes that caught Sherlock, red and desperate and watery.

“John,” he breathed, looking over the man’s face, and John quickly ducked it, trying to turn away, but Sherlock held him fast. “No, talk to me!” Sherlock demanded, tugging at his shoulders as he weaved his head into John’s eye line again. “John, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” he urged, trying to pull Sherlock’s arms away, but he still wouldn’t look him in the eye.

“John!”

“It’s nothing, Sherlock, just—”

“Tell me!”

John let out a snarl of frustration, breaking free of Sherlock as he twisted away, but then he stopped, back half turned as he stared at the wall. He took in a jagged breath, shoulders shaking as he let it out, and Sherlock didn’t move, didn’t speak, didn’t even breathe for fear of breaking the moment. A swallow moved down John’s throat, and, slowly, he turned, blinking up at Sherlock with swimming eyes.

“There—There was a girl,” he choked, voice high and breaking. “She had a heart condition, a—a birth defect. She’s been in and out of hospital her whole life. I—” He broke off, looking into the kitchen, lip trembling as he swallowed. “She was supposed to be fine,” he said, shaking his head down at the
ground, and Sherlock felt the corners of his own eyes sting. “She was gonna get a pacemaker in a couple months, she-she was supposed to-“ He lifted a shaking hand to his mouth, closing his eyes for a long moment. “She was eight years old,” he finally whispered, hand falling to his side as he shook his head at the ground. He then looked up at Sherlock, who couldn’t breathe for the pain of it, for the shards of his own heart piercing through his lungs as he looked into John’s aching eyes. “Eight years old, and I-I couldn’t save her.” He blinked up at the ceiling, a failing effort to hold back tears. “I couldn’t save her,” he repeated, voice wobbling, and Sherlock stepped forward, hands outstretched consoling.

“It’s not your fault,” he assured, shaking his head. “There was nothing- It’s not your fault.”

“I know it’s not my fault!” John snapped, breaths shaking as they heaved through his lungs, and Sherlock stopped, lowering his hands to his sides.

He stared helplessly a moment, nothing quite seeming appropriate, nothing being good enough to say. “What-What do you need?” he finally asked, shifting his hands lightly at his side, and John blinked at him, anger slipping into confusion.

“I-I don’t know, I-” he stammered, shaking his head around at the flat. “I don’t even know why I’m here, I just-” He shrugged helplessly, sighing as he shut his eyes to the ground again.

Sherlock took a single step closer, drawing near enough to reach out to John’s hand, just brushing his fingertips to the man’s tan ones.

John turned at the touch, but did not pull away, merely frowning down confusedly before lifting his questioning eyes to Sherlock’s.

Sherlock hoped it wasn’t too obvious, hoped he wasn’t baring every secret he’d rather keep buried about how he felt about the man he ought to barely know at all, but something in the widening of John’s eyes told him he was, so Sherlock figured he might as well finish it off. “What do you need?” he repeated, soft and breathless.

For a moment, John did nothing, only stared at him, his eyes searching between Sherlock’s uncomprehendingly. Then, as if suddenly decided, he blinked, grabbing Sherlock’s hand in his and pulling it forward, stumbling Sherlock into him as he clutched at the back of his neck, pulling Sherlock’s mouth atop his once more. “You,” he panted, Sherlock dizzy from the barrage of lips, teeth, and tongue weaving their way in between the syllables. “You, I just- Just you,” he added, and, that much, Sherlock could give.

They stumbled backward, Sherlock more pulled along than leading, even though he was at the front, and, before he knew it, they were at the end of the bed, John pushing him down in familiar fashion. This time, however, the clothes didn’t come off in one quick sweep, John taking his time as he peeled up Sherlock’s shirt, tongue and teeth dancing up his chest as the fabric slowly lifted away to reveal it. When the shirt came loose over Sherlock’s head, John sank down to his neck, sucking a bruise just above his collarbone, and Sherlock gasped, clutching into the man’s back, which was far too obscured by layers. John’s jacket was already gone, so Sherlock tugged at the hem of shirt, John leaning back quickly to rip it off before turning his attention to Sherlock’s trousers. They were only pajamas, the drawstring plenty slack enough to easily slide over his hips, and then he was entirely naked, staring up to where John hovered over him, still in his jeans.

The streetlamps poured in through the window, settling in a stripe over John’s tanned chest, which rose and fell with frantic breaths, his blue eyes wild in the dim. He was looking down at Sherlock, eyes lost as the roved over his skin, and, without a thought, Sherlock lifted a hand, planting it in the center of his chest.
John’s heart pounded hard beneath his palm, and Sherlock frowned at it, fingers shifting slightly as he grazed over the thrumming skin, and then John caught his wrist, holding him still and startling his eyes up. The man’s breathing slowed even as Sherlock watched, his entire body frozen under John’s gaze, which steadily softened as his pulse eased. Eventually, though it was impossible to say how long later, John moved, pushing lightly on Sherlock wrist to guide it up. Sliding Sherlock’s hand up to his shoulder, he then broke the contact with his skin, ducking his head and bringing Sherlock’s wrist up to place a gentle kiss to the pulse point, and a soft breath wavered out past Sherlock’s lips, his eyes widening as he watched the display that ought to belong only to dreams. John then blinked, looking down at him again, and there was a moment nothing moved, the whole world grinding to a halt apart from Sherlock’s heart in his ears, and then John dropped Sherlock’s arm, lowering back down on top of him as he brought their mouths together.

Sherlock did not know how to kiss like this, how to make his mouth respond to the words it felt like John was saying in the tender slide of his lips and tongue, so much softer than they normally were, and yet no less desperate. For being given less, Sherlock only wanted more, and the second John had wrestled out of his own jeans, Sherlock was trying to break free from under him, moving to turn over on the bed.

“No,” John said, placing a hand to his hip and stalling the movement, and Sherlock blinked up at him, his vision blurred with lust. “No,” John repeated, shaking his head, eyes soft as he lifted tentative fingers to Sherlock’s chin, his thumb brushing in a tingling slide over Sherlock’s bottom lip, “I-I wanna see you. If-If that’s alright.”

Sherlock looked up at him, the soft hesitation of his face juxtaposed with the desperate need in his eyes, and, though he thought that was plenty more than alright, all he did was nod.

John gave him the barest hint of a smile, and then moved away, grabbing his usual supplies from his jeans pocket, and Sherlock almost asked him then how many condoms and lube packets he carried around with him on a regular basis, and then decided against it, the potential answers putting a pit in his stomach that had no sense being there now.

A second later, John returned, sliding the condom over his leaking cock, and Sherlock felt a pang of want stab through his chest, wishing John could be inside him wholly, no barriers or layers left between them, but this was only sex, not trust, not love, so Sherlock said nothing, swallowing the bitter pill and focusing on the tear of the second packet.

He hadn’t been sleeping with anyone but John, so there was still some work needed to loosen him, but it seemed to go much faster this time, an anomaly Sherlock was attributing to the fact that John kissed him constantly, Sherlock having no opportunity to tense up and also keep up. Before long, John was brushing against his prostate, Sherlock whimpering into his mouth, and he hooked his ankles around John’s thighs, pulling him forward.

“John!” he pleaded as John pushed against that spot once more, and, as John stilled, Sherlock realized it was the first time he had done that, the first time anyone had uttered a name in bed, and he worried he’d made some mistake, some grave misstep, but then he looked up at John’s face.

John was staring down at him, eyes wide and impossibly dark as they pinned Sherlock down, and, as a slow breath shook out of him, Sherlock shuddered, suddenly so very exposed. John then looked away, sliding his fingers from Sherlock as he took his cock in hand, lining it up at Sherlock’s entrance.

Sherlock had grown somewhat accustomed to the feeling of John pushing inside him, but never with John’s eyes on him, watching every twitch of his body and broken gasp bobbing in his throat, and it made the whole thing almost unbearable, like a fire over his skin.
When John’s hips were flush to his, the blond leant down, pressing his forehead to Sherlock’s as he breathed, occasionally dipping his chin to press his lips to Sherlock’s mouth while they adjusted. After he was ready, he pushed lightly back against John’s hips, the usual signal, but John’s response was far from usual.

His first thrust shook through Sherlock, punching the breath out of him, and he never entirely got it back, gasping and choking as John pounded into him relentlessly. There were apparently three types of sex: bad sex Sherlock had had with everyone else, great sex Sherlock had had with John Watson, and mind-numbing sex with a John Watson who really, really needed it, and Sherlock the farthest thing from minded. He could feel John’s frustration, feel the pain and anger pushing him as he thrust harder and harder, but, where that disturbed him before, it was different with John, the constant presses of the man’s soft lips to his reminding him that John still knew who he was, that John was still there and not just using him as some extreme version of a stress ball.

Still, it was almost too much when John shifted, tugging Sherlock’s legs up onto his shoulders, the angle of his thrusts shifting impossibly deep, and Sherlock nothing short of screamed, fingers clawing across John’s back. John, however, far from slowing down, only pushed harder, his breathing growing more and more ragged where it gusted over Sherlock’s face, and Sherlock couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe for the pressure spiraling in his gut.

He whimpered, fingers snapping to fist into the sheets, but couldn’t control himself much longer, and, desperate for relief, lunged for his cock where it bounced against his stomach.

“No,” John growled, and Sherlock shivered at the tone before he even fully understood what was going on, John snatching his wrist from the air and pinning it into the mattress beside Sherlock’s shoulder. “No,” he repeated, rhythm faltering a moment as he repeated the gesture with Sherlock’s other hand, and then he bent down, Sherlock moaning into his mouth as John kissed him.

He was half mad with need, trying to shift and writhe to somehow get friction on his cock, but John was having none of it, biting hard into Sherlock’s bottom lip at one point when he tried. Sherlock cried out, his back arching, but it did no good, the heat in his gut spiraling tighter and tighter until he thought he might beg for it.

Suddenly, John’s thrusts quickened to a pace Sherlock wouldn’t have imagined was possible, the bed actually vibrating with it, and he practically sobbed, neck snapping back against the pillow. Somewhere very far away he heard someone spewing a steady stream of John’s name in breathless, broken gasps, and he was just realizing his own lips were moving when John lunged down, biting hard at the base of his neck, and Sherlock shouted as he came, entirely untouched.

John groaned a second later, his body shaking with his own release, and Sherlock was shouting his name, and John was gasping out Sherlock’s, and then everything got very, very dark.

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Sherlock’s first thought was that he was cold, his second was that everything hurt, and his third was that he was alone.

He opened his eyes, following his hand where it stretched across the barren surface of the mattress beside him, and then sucked in a waking breath, squinting into the dark as he propped himself up on an elbow, rubbing his eyes. The room was empty, and, upon closer inspection, bereft of John’s clothes, nothing but Sherlock’s scattered on the floor as he leaned over the side of the bed. Something like terror lodged thick in his throat, but then he heard a sound out in the living room, and bolted up, scrambling to find his pajamas.
John was probably just going to the bathroom, or maybe it was later than it looked out the window and he had to go to work. Maybe he’d gotten an emergency call and hadn’t wanted to wake Sherlock, leaving him a note on the counter instead, but, as Sherlock burst out the door, shirt quite possibly inside out, there was no note on the counter, only John, fully dressed and frozen halfway to the door, the look on his face leaving no doubt.

Sherlock felt sick, shame and anger and betrayal all spiraling together, but he swallowed it down, setting his jaw. “Really?” he snapped, vindictively thrilled when John flinched.

“Sherlock, it’s—it’s not what it—“ John started, but Sherlock cut him off.

“What it looks like?” he finished, and John closed his mouth, dropping his eyes. “Because it looks like you’re trying to sneak out.”

“I—I’m not- I’m not sneaking out,” John stammered, and Sherlock scoffed.

“Then what are you doing?” he snarled, hurt pushing past his lips as anger.

“I just- I have to go,” John replied, rattling his head as he moved to turn back to the door, but Sherlock stepped forward, calling his attention back.

“Why?” he argued, arms lifting at his sides. “Why do you have to go? And why do you have to do it without telling me?”

“I just have to, Sherlock,” John said, voice growing brittle, but Sherlock didn’t particularly care if he was angry.

“Why?” he urged, stepping forward again as John began to walk away. “You can’t even tell me!?” he called, and John stopped, though he did not turn around. “You’re just gonna walk out? Not even give me an explanation?”

“What do you want me to say, Sherlock!?” John spat back, spinning on his heels as he glared. “I can’t do this, alright? I don’t do this!”

“Do what!?”

“THIS!” John shouted, waving between them. “This-This thing, whatever it is! I don’t do this! I do sex, that’s it! No dates, no-no ‘Good morning, dear’s and bathrobe breakfasts, just sex!’” He rattled his head, a humorless twist of a smile on his face as he looked up toward the ceiling. “And then… then you come along”—he waved a weak hand up over Sherlock’s stunned body—“and-and mess everything up—“

“Why?” Sherlock asked desperately, shaking his head. “Why does that have to mess everything up? So, you want more than sex, it’s not the end of—”

“But I don’t!”

Sherlock physically rattled where he stood, all the air forced out of him, like when he was a little kid and he fell backward off the swing set.

“I don’t want more,” John said, anger passing into cold, and whatever tenderness Sherlock would swear those eyes held mere hours ago was gone now. “It never works out,” he added, shaking his head. “Not for me.”

“But, you-you can’t know that, you—"
“Don’t, Sherlock,” John interrupted, shaking his head at him. “Just don’t.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, and then let it close again, setting his jaw as he stared icily back at John.

John sighed, running a hand back through his hair as he stared at the floor. He then turned, moving toward the door without a word, but Sherlock called him back, a thought suddenly striking through his brain.

“Fear,” he said, and John stopped, hand on the doorknob.

“What?” he asked, turning over his shoulder, and Sherlock took a small step forward.

“When I told you about how I see things in people,” Sherlock explained, watching as John’s mouth clapped closed in recognition, “you asked me what I saw in you. Well, that’s what it is.” He held John’s eyes steadily, unwilling to show even an ounce of weakness. “Fear.”

John swallowed, his resilience wavering around his eyes. “And what am I supposed to be afraid of?” he replied, but his voice trembled.

Sherlock shrugged, shaking his head. “I don’t know,” he said softly, “but I see it. Every time you look at me.”

John blinked, the first to duck his eyes away. He stared at the floor a moment, eyes shifting with thought, and then stiffened his jaw, fingers clenching around the handle. “Goodbye, Sherlock,” he muttered, and then he was gone, pulling the door closed behind him with a terminal click.

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Sherlock didn’t leave his flat for a week, gaining a whole new appreciation for delivery people.

The next week, he threw himself back into his work, nearly painting himself into passing out as he went two nights in a row without sleep. That Friday, he got a text from Irene, whose invitation to go to the gay bar again he had not-so-politely passed on.

_Hey how did things work out with that doctor?_

Sherlock’s blood ran cold, but Irene would call him if he didn’t reply quick enough, so he forced his shaking fingers into formation.

_Fine_

_You’re not together though right?_

Sherlock blinked down at the message, swallowing his sudden nausea.

_No. Why?_

_Nothing he’s just dancing with some guy and I wanted to make sure I didn’t have to kick his ass Sherlock?_

_Sherlock are you there?_

_I have to kick his ass anyway don’t I?_
Sherlock!?

I’m coming over.

Chicken or veggie pad Thai?

Chicken

Atta boy! Be there in 20

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“And do you know who that is!?”

“No, but I’m sure I’m about to.”

“That’s a reporter from Time Out!”

“Why would he be here?” Sherlock asked, frowning out the way Irene was pointing. “The show’s only for one weekend. There’d be no point putting it in the magazine now.”

Irene tutted at him, swatting him on the arm. “It’s the principle of the thing, Sherlock! This way, if you ever do anything else, they’ll be sure to mention it!”

“Provided he likes it,” Sherlock grumbled, and Irene rolled her eyes.

“Everyone likes it, Sherlock,” she assured, resting a hand on his arm. “You’re incredible! And I’ve heard at least three trophy wives begging their husbands to buy them pieces.”

“What a ringing, misogynistic endorsement,” Sherlock replied, and Irene laughed.

“I’m gonna go grab another champagne,” she said. “You want one?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, best not. I’m supposed to be mingling,” he drawled distastefully, and Irene smiled.

“Something stronger. On it!” she chirped, and Sherlock laughed, shaking his head at her as she walked away.

Alone now, for however brief a time until someone snagged him again, Sherlock allowed himself a quiet moment to be smug, looking out over the gallery. It was a small room, but in a popular area, Irene having chosen the spot, and there was a fair variety of people meandering around the exposed brick interior. Some of them were the upper crust, people who were likely only there because of his Holmes name, but there was also a good turnout from the Camden crowd, and, god, was he having a fantastic time watching those two sects interacting. Even as he watched, a woman in a tailored BCBG gaped at a passing young man in platform boots, gauges slotted into his ears, and Sherlock chuckled, the entire headache of talking to these people almost worth it from those smaller moments.

“Hiding?”

Sherlock jumped, twisting to his left, hating himself for the way his heart skittered, even after over a month.

John Watson—wearing that same damn suit again—smiled tremulously across at him as he ambled toward where Sherlock had taken temporary shelter behind a wide support column. “ Might wanna
find a new spot soon,” he said, casting a glance back over his shoulder. “They’re already talking about where you’ve run off to.”

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock snapped, never being one to beat around the bush, but John didn’t look particularly surprised, not that he faltered either.

He didn’t get too close, a respectful boundary of space between them, but Sherlock could feel his eyes on him like a physical touch, pulling at him and chipping away at his resolve. “I-I just- I wanted to apologize,” he said, words slow and hesitant. “I- Before, I- It was wrong, I was wrong, and…and you were right.”

Sherlock swallowed, forcing himself to be unmoved. “About what?” he clipped, tilting his head. “I’m right about a lot of things. Facebook stocks being a bust, Bruce Willis being dead the whole time, that guy in *Game of Thrones* who-”

“Woah, woah, I’m not caught up!” John interjected, waving his hands in frantic censure, and Sherlock was so tempted—so, so tempted—but some sins were even too great for him. “I-I meant… you were right about me. About me…being afraid.” He looked up at Sherlock through his lashes, twisting his fingers together in front of him.

Sherlock said nothing, but did furrow his eyebrows, his confusion prompting continuance.

“I- I’m not used to this,” John said, twitching a hand between them as he moved a step closer. “I don’t- I’ve never had a…relationship. Not properly, not the sort of thing I really care about working out.”

Sherlock’s throat tightened, and he couldn’t speak now if he wanted to, merely watching John with rapt attention as his hands began to tremble.

“I didn’t know how to deal with it, I- I’m not even sure if I knew what was happening, but-” He sighed, running a hand back through his hair before he took a steady ing breath, looking at Sherlock in a way that screamed sincerity. “I- I can’t stop thinking about you,” he breathed desperately, shaking his head. “I’ve tried everything, I-I took on extra shifts, I started cycling to work, I went to every gay bar in the city—which I know sounds awful, but I thought, if I could find someone else…” He trailed off, hand twisting helplessly in the air, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed skeptically, remembering Irene’s message. “But, the thing is… I couldn’t,” John said, shaking his head helplessly. “I never even got out of the bar with anyone, let alone home. They were just- They were just wrong. All of them. They- They weren’t… They weren’t you. And I-I need you, Sherlock.” He stepped forward, hands bobbing pleading in the air in front of him as he blue eyes searched frantically over Sherlock’s face. “Just you, only you, and I know, I know I should have figured that out a long time ago, and you’ve probably moved on, and, honestly, you might be better off without me anyway. But, if not,” he said, soft and desperately sincere, and Sherlock nearly had to close his eyes, unable to look directly into John’s, “if you can give me just one more chance… well”—he shrugged, a breathless puff of a laugh pushing past a faint smile—“I’d really like to take you to dinner.”

Sherlock was not the hopeless romantic type. He was an artist, yes, but he did not entertain grand romantic fantasies, real life just wasn’t built for that. And then John fucking Watson—whose middle name he didn’t even know, so it might as well be ‘fucking’—just shows up out of the clear blue sky in a tailored blue suit and delivers a speech John Hughes wishes he’d have thought of. And Sherlock almost hated him, hated him for making him so goddamn human, for making him fall for every romantic cliché in the proverbial book, but he couldn’t, couldn’t even begin to, because it wasn’t just some faceless romantic hero who shows up at the last second standing there, it was John. And, god help him, he loved John, loved him even at the last second, and it was with only the smallest bit of doubt that he replied.
“I don’t know about dinner,” Sherlock said, and John looked halfway to crestfallen before he continued, “but I think I could fit in a bathrobe breakfast.”

John blinked, head tilting, and then, like a light switch flicking inside his eyes, he placed it, a broad grin breaking out across his face. “I do make a great eggs benedict,” he replied, and Sherlock laughed, perhaps a tad too giddily, but John didn’t seem to mind, beaming absurdly right back at him.

“You!”

They both turned, Irene appearing from Sherlock’s right, glaring fire down at John, who had the good sense to back away, a swallow moving down his throat.

“Irene,” Sherlock attempted to soothe, but the woman completely ignored him.

“How dare you show up here!?” she challenged, barreling down on John, who had nowhere to go, backed into a corner as he so literally was. “This is the most important day of Sherlock’s entire life—”

“Well…”

“And I will not let a cowardly little worm like you—”

“Irene!”

“What!?”

Sherlock lifted his hands, feeling somewhat like he was trying to talk down a feral tiger, Irene glaring and huffing at him as she was. “John came to apologize,” he said, soft and slow, and Irene blinked, eyes shifting between them skeptically.

“A-Apologize?” she muttered, narrowing her eyes at John, who had gone wisely still. “Why? What’s your angle, Doc?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock said, stepping sidelong, halfway blocking her from John. “He just wanted to apologize. And then take me out to dinner,” he added in a rush, and Irene gaped at him.

“He what!?!”

“Irene, stop!” Sherlock said, grabbing her by the shoulders as she made a run at John. “This isn’t how you want to end up in the society pages, is it?”

Irene slowly calmed within his grasp, her eyes narrowed at John over his shoulder. “Are you sure about this?” she whispered, ducking her head in to Sherlock. “Because I know people. I could have him—”

“Yes,” Sherlock interrupted, not really wanting to know what Irene was capable of for the sake of plausible deniability in case he ever had to testify, “I’m sure.” He dropped his head, meeting her eyes steadily, and, after careful examination, she leaned back, expression still suspicious, but resigned.

“I’ve got my eye on you, Doc,” she said ominously, watching John over her shoulder as she turned, heading back out into the party and toward the Time Out reporter.

Sherlock smiled, shaking his head at her as she walked away, and John drew up to his side, blowing out a breath.

“So, how scared should I be?” he asked, and Sherlock chuckled.
“Somewhere between changing your locks and leaving the country,” he replied, and John huffed a laugh.

“Oh, good,” he muttered, tipping his head, “so I’m right on track then.”

Sherlock laughed, and then turned, his attention caught by the owner of the gallery, a young woman named Molly who was waving at him frantically.

“Looks like duty calls,” John mumbled at his side, and Sherlock sighed, prompting a chuckle from the man.

“She always asks me to get coffee,” he grumbled miserably, and John laughed, drawing close to his side.

“Well, then,” he said, smiling brightly up at him, “it’s a good thing your boyfriend’s here to set her straight.”

Sherlock frowned, double-checking before the hopeful flutter in his chest got too out of hand, but then John only beamed wider, and Sherlock went full-on fireworks. “Good thing, indeed,” he said, and then looked back to Molly, waving a hand to signal his compliance.

“So, how did we meet?” John asked, slowing their steps as they crossed the gallery.

“You don’t think a gay bar’s romantic enough?” Sherlock replied, and John laughed, nudging playfully at his side.

“Not quite. Oh, how ‘bout I hit you with my bike on my way to work!” John suggested, turning excitedly up at him.

“How is that romantic?” Sherlock chuckled, and John grinned.

“Because then I had to invite you to coffee to make up for it, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes, but he played along. “And then coffee turned into dinner-”

“And dinner turned into bathrobe breakfasts,” John picked up, smirking, “and now, here we are!”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head, and then simply smiled down at John, the man’s blue eyes twinkling up at him from his shoulder. “Here we are,” he affirmed, both of them grinning rather foolishly as they drew to Molly’s side.
Mischief Night

Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** Teenlock (Perhaps Unilock?) John and Sherlock deck out the trees in the front yard of Mycroft's home with toilet paper as a Halloween prank. Perhaps do a few other shenanigans while they're at it. - anonymous

By the way, if any of you are going to Sherlock Seattle this year, drop me a line because I'm gonna be there!

“Hurry up!”

“I’m going as fast as I can!”

“Well, go faster!”

“I can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m carrying all the stuff!” John hissed, rattling the strap of his backpack for emphasis, his keychain clinking softly as it swung.

Sherlock looked back at him, brow furrowed irritably. “I could’ve helped,” he snapped, and John’s mouth dropped open.

“You could’ve- You handed me the backpack!”

“Shh!” Sherlock swatted a hand back at him, and John’s jaw clicked, eyes narrowing furiously at the back of the brunette’s head as he peered over the shrub they were crouched behind. “What time is it?” he asked, turning back after a moment when John did not reply.

“Oh, sorry, is that my job too?” John muttered, blinking owlishly as he tapped an innocent hand to his sternum, and Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Fine,” he bit, “thank you ever-so-much for carrying the incredibly heavy toilet paper.”

John, very maturely, stuck his tongue out, and then slipped his phone out of his pocket. “11:43,” he answered, and Sherlock nodded, turning back to the house.

“He’ll be in bed in two minutes,” he whispered, craning his neck up, his eyes reflecting the lighted windows—just two of them on the bottom floor.

John sighed, sliding the backpack off his shoulder and onto the grass, his legs following a moment later as he crossed them beneath him. “Why are we vandalizing your own house again?” he asked, and Sherlock turned toward him, lowering to the ground to mirror John’s position.

“Because,” he said, leaning over his knees toward John, his eyes bright in the faint blue glow of the moon, “I’m supposed to be staying at your house for half-term.”
“You are staying at my house for half-term,” John reminded. “You and your frigid feet.”

“I told you, you could sleep on the couch.”

“It’s my room!”

“And I’m your guest.”

“You’re at my house more than I am, you- Ugh!” John snarled, shaking his head as he looked out to the lawn a moment. “Just finish the story,” he muttered, flicking a hand, but Sherlock’s smile still looked victorious for some reason.

“Well, because I’m staying at your house,” Sherlock continued, pointing across at John, as if John would forget who he was without the direction, “there’s no way he’ll suspect it was us. You live over half a mile away.”

“Yeah, the fingers I can’t feel are aware.”

“Oh, that you cannot blame on me,” Sherlock insisted, jabbing a finger at him. “I told you to get your gloves before we left, and you know you have poor circulation.”

John sneered, rattling his head, but he couldn’t exactly argue, and Sherlock merely smirked smugly back before picking up.

“I don’t get back until Tuesday, so he’ll be the one cleaning it up.” He bobbed a head back behind him toward the back of Holmes Manor, where he and Mycroft were staying alone for the month, their parents travelling through Europe somewhere.

John had long stopped trying to keep track of it, Sherlock’s parents more specters than people, and, indeed, for all the years John had known Sherlock, he’d only seen the couple three times, and that was at the Christmas Eve parties he’d eventually earned a standing invitation to. He’d needed to buy a suit especially for it, Sherlock dragging him somewhere to get measured—by far the most awkward experience of his life—by ‘his guy’, as he’d called him, and John dreaded the day he grew out of it, likely to never have anything so nice in his closet again. Although, it was possible he was done growing, being 17 and all, but, personally, he was hoping against, growing uneasy at the rate Sherlock’s year-younger body was outstripping him.

“It’s the perfect plan!” Sherlock said excitedly, the grin on his face usually reserved for when he was walking John through his latest phone interaction with Scotland Yard, one particular inspector there actually starting to call him now instead of Sherlock just constantly pestering everyone with tips.

John, in spite of the cold and the fact that his mum was going to be furious when she inevitably found out, smiled, shaking his head fondly across at the brunette. “Alright,” he sighed, tugging the backpack across the ground toward him, “but we’re stopping at that 24 hour coffee place on the way back. And you’re buying. And,” he added, lifting a finger as Sherlock made to interject, “you’re not going to complain about the smell of my pumpkin spice latte.”

“But it’s-”

“Ahh!” John clipped, pointing at him, brows lifted as he waited.

Sherlock’s expression twisted with torment, mouth twitching as it hovered open, hesitant, and then he sighed, slumping toward the ground in defeat. “Fine,” he muttered, and John grinned, savoring one of his few victories.
He unzipped the backpack, reaching down into the six rolls of toilet paper—all they could find in the house—and handing three to Sherlock, slipping the bag back onto his shoulder as he pulled out his first one.

Sherlock untangled his long limbs, moving back up into a crouch as he peeked back over the groomed shrubbery. “Okay,” he whispered, looking over his shoulder as he beckoned a hand at John, and they stepped out, getting straight to work.

Sherlock had a plan of attack in mind, of course, directing John to certain trees as he moved to a large oak off to the left, and John started in on the maples, nearly bare now at the end of October.

His feet crunched through the leaves, and he could feel Sherlock’s eyes glaring at his back, but not even Mycroft had super hearing, so John merely sat his backpack against the trunk of the tree and started tossing toilet paper over the branches.

“You’re not getting it high enough!” Sherlock’s hiss carried through the relative dark, and John rolled his eyes, turning to look back over his shoulder.

“I’m working up to it,” he muttered, and Sherlock’s face, even from this distance, clearly pinched in irritation.

“You need to arc it more,” he criticized, and John turned completely now, incredulous. “Like this,” he added imperiously, lobbing a roll in a smooth sweep of his arm, the white unfurling in a streak through the air as it caught on an upper branch before tumbling down. Sherlock went to fetch the remainder of the roll, breaking off the dangling piece, and, as he stood up, John pulled his arm back.

The roll hit Sherlock square in the side of the head as he straightened, and he leapt back with a strangled shout, hand coming up to his hair as he blinked in alarm down at the roll of toilet paper that bounced to the ground. Mouth open in affront, he rounded on John, who smirked.

“How was that?” he quipped, bobbing his head, and Sherlock took a step forward, eyes narrowing, but he only got through the first furious syllable before they were suddenly swamped in light.

For a second, neither of them moved, both blinking in wide-eyed alarm at the spotlights blaring down at them, and then, on a wordless signal, they bolted.

John swiped his backpack off the ground, barreling back toward the bush they’d started behind, and Sherlock skidded in just in front of him, both of them tumbling down to their knees just as the back door opened.

“Who’s there!?” came a shout, and they pushed leaves aside to see through the branches, both panting heavily with adrenaline, Sherlock pressed against John down his side.

It was only the end of October, but it felt like Christmas to John, seeing Mycroft standing there in a long red robe and fuzzy white slippers.

“Oh my god,” Sherlock hissed at his side, and John shook against him as he laughed. “Shh!” Sherlock scolded, clapping a hand to John’s mouth, and John wasn’t exactly proud of his response, but Sherlock did make a rather satisfying sound. “Eugh!” he spluttered, jerking his hand away and grimacing down at his palm. “Did you just…lick me?”

John beamed at him, Sherlock shaking his head, clearly disturbed, and then they both snapped back to the house as Mycroft shouted again.

“Sherlock!” he cried, glaring back and forth across the lawn. “Sherlock, I know it’s you! If you think
I’m cleaning this up, you’re delusional! And John!”

John turned to Sherlock, but he looked just as perplexed.

“I’d have thought you at least would have more sense than this!” he snapped, and John recoiled a bit, actually ashamed for a moment.

Mycroft glared out a few seconds longer, and then huffed, the furious puff of air audible even across the lawn as he twisted on his slippers, stomping back inside.

They continued staring a moment, silent, and then burst into laughter, smothering it as best they could with hands clasped to their mouths.

“Oh my god, the slippers!” John wheezed, eyes stinging with the prospect of tears. “Did you see the slippers?”

Sherlock, beyond speech, only nodded, toppling into John’s shoulder as he clutched at his side.

John couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed this hard, his sides actually aching with it, and it was a long time before he stopped shaking, finally managing to gasp in enough air to stall the burning in his lungs. “Okay, okay,” he panted, Sherlock still chuckling against him, his curls pillowed on John’s shoulder, and, unthinkingly, John tipped his head, leaning it atop Sherlock’s as they sighed back down to healthy breathing patterns.

Of course, as soon as they did, the moment started to grow awkward, and John’s heart picked up, the familiar smell of Sherlock’s shampoo much closer than he had learned to deal with.

He’d met Sherlock when they were 12 and 11 respectively, a happenstance collision in the cafeteria leading to the most impassioned argument over chocolate pudding the world had likely ever seen, but, by the time John had bought him a replacement—picking the one with the largest dollop of whipped cream, of course—he’d somehow gained a new friend, and the duo had been inseparable ever since. He didn’t know when it had happened, no single point in their collective history he could designate as the starting line, but, somewhere in the transition from playing tag to playing rugby, from planning birthday parties to planning for university, something had changed, something indefinable that they decidedly never talked about, but it was there, sparking between them when their limbs brushed under the blankets during the sleepovers they were most assuredly too old to be having.

John tried to breathe through his mouth, the scent of Sherlock too much to bear if he wanted to not do anything stupid, but his throat betrayed him, the air hitching as it passed his trembling lips.

Sherlock moved, slow and deliberate as he lifted off of John’s shoulder, and John turned toward his face, his heart in his throat as he prepared to explain, to lie the reaction away, but the words whisked away from him as Sherlock’s eyes met his. The pupils were wide within the grey as he searched over John’s face, picking him apart with the same unerring focus John had seen so many times pouring over case files, but it was him this time, and he opened his mouth to get out ahead of what he was sure Sherlock saw.

“Sherlock—” he breathed, but the brunette stopped him, two cold, pale fingers lifting to rest against John’s lips.

Sherlock looked down at the digits, frowning slightly, as if surprised himself to find them there, and then softly moved the pads of his fingers to glide across John’s bottom lip in a tingling sweep.

John gasped, his lip twitching beneath Sherlock’s touch, and Sherlock startled, eyes widening
slightly as they snapped up to John’s eyes, and he looked suddenly so uncertain, so afraid, that John
didn’t even think before snatching his hand with his own, pulling it away as he closed the inches
between them.

Sherlock’s entire body seized in shock as John’s lips pressed against his, but, as John moved
delicately against the cold-chapped skin, the tension in his muscles slowly unwound, starting with his
fingers, which gripped back against John’s where their hands remained intertwined between their
chests. He moved back against him, just slightly, but it set something loose in John’s stomach that
he’d been beating down for years, a thousand forcibly forgotten fantasies rushing dizzyingly back
to the forefront of his mind, and he lifted his free hand to Sherlock’s neck, finally able to hold him
where he’d wanted him to be for years.

“Aha!”

They flew apart, shrapnel from the invisible bomb going off between them, and John flung an arm
up over his eyes, shielding them from the blinding light.

“Mycroft!” Sherlock shrieked from his left, and John’s blood ran cold.

The light moved down to the ground, and John blinked up, meeting Mycroft’s gaping expression, the
former paling in terror while the latter blanched with shock.

“I- Er-” Mycroft stammered, looking between them, head rattling as he stumbled a step backward,
and then he rallied, straightening his back as he tugged down at the hem of the jumper he had
changed into, his chin lifting regally. “Well, it’s about time,” he snapped, and John almost threw up
for humiliation. “I was beginning to think I was going to have to intervene.”

“Well, you’re certainly interfering,” Sherlock snarled back, and John was grateful at least one of
them could still manage to string together words.

Mycroft flushed a bit around his collar, but appeared otherwise unaffected. “You’re cleaning that
up,” he ordered, bobbing the flashlight over the bush at their backs toward the paper-strewn trees,
and then stomped off with as much dignity as the slippers still on his feet could possibly allow.

John remained motionless, staring down at the ground as Mycroft crunched back across the lawn,
door closing with a soft rattle that carried back. He couldn’t move, couldn’t have even thought about
it, and just continued blinking down at the leaf-scattered grass as Sherlock shuffled closer in his
peripheral vision.

“John?” he asked warily, leaning around to try and catch John’s eye. “Are-Are you…alright?”

John breathed, trying to focus, and then the past few minutes seemed to hit him all at once, and he
started laughing, soft huffs building up into guffaws.

Sherlock leaned back, brow furrowing in concern. “John?” he inquired carefully, but John just
leaned back, branches rustling as he pushed against them, shaking his head up at the stars. “What?
Why are you laughing?”

John smiled, dropping his chin a moment before he turned to meet Sherlock’s perplexed gaze.
“Nothing,” he assured, shaking his head, “just wondering how long I have to live.”

Sherlock frowned, tilting his head.

“Mycroft,” John added, bobbing a thumb back toward the house. “He’s probably gonna have me
killed.”
Sherlock smiled sheepishly, ducking his head to the grass. “Unlikely,” he murmured, shaking his head as he looked up at John through his lashes. “He wasn’t kidding about that intervening bit,” he continued, tipping his head the way Mycroft had gone. “He- He’s been telling me to make a move for ages,” he chuckled, plucking idly at the grass in front of his crossed legs.

John suddenly wasn’t cold anymore, sitting up, a slow smile building on his face. “Ages?” he crooned, and Sherlock snapped a look at him, his cheeks darkening.

“No,” he muttered, and John grinned. “Not-Not ages, just…a while.”

“A while?” John drawled, and Sherlock shook his head, rolling a look to the sky.

“Shut up,” he mumbled embarrassedly, ripping up a few blades of grass and tossing them at John.

John laughed, snatching Sherlock’s hand out of the air and lowering it to the ground. He turned his palm up, cradling Sherlock’s hands within in as he traced patterns over the bones protruding from the pale skin. “I- It’s been a while for me too,” he said, looking up out of the tops of his eyes.

Sherlock’s lips parted in soft surprise, and then he smiled, eyes twinkling impishly. “How a while?” he teased, and John flushed, looking away as he lifted their hands and pushed, Sherlock toppling onto his back as he laughed.

Shaking his head, John rose, sliding his backpack onto his shoulder as he moved to stand above where Sherlock was rolling back to sitting. “Come on,” he said, lowering a hand to the brunette, “let’s go do Jim’s house.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked, frowning, and John dropped his head to him, lifting his brows.

“You need a reason?” he muttered, and Sherlock laughed, palm pressing warm into John’s as he took the offered hand.

“You’re freezing!” he hissed as John pulled him to standing, hands lingering together.

John rolled his eyes, turning away to start walking back to the street. “You’re one to talk, Tundra Toes,” he countered, and then laughed, Sherlock’s mouth dropping open in comical offense, but the boy still followed, pale fingers interlacing with John’s as they picked their way through the fallen leaves.
John coughed, the bed shaking with the force of it, and Sherlock winced, passing him across a tissue. “Cheers,” it sort of sounded like he mumbled, and then promptly sneezed, per protocol after one of his more wracking coughs. He groaned, leaning his head back against the pillow as he blinked miserably up at the ceiling.

“No better, then?” Sherlock asked, and John rolled his head toward him with a flat look. Sherlock smiled, biting his lip as he dropped his face to the mattress, fingers plucking sheepishly at the duvet.

“I think I’m dying,” John grumbled, eyes pinching shut, and Sherlock chuckled. “I can see the light.”

“Well, don’t go into it,” Sherlock muttered as John coughed again.

“Take care of my jumpers,” he wheezed, lifting a dramatic hand toward him, and Sherlock laughed, gently bat it away. John smiled at him, and then they lapsed back into silence, Sherlock returning to his twisting at the grey blankets.

“I could stay,” he blurted, snapping his head back up, but John just sighed tiredly, shaking his head.

“Sherlock, we talked about this—”

“But you always come with us!” Sherlock whined, leaning forward. “It’ll be so boring without you!”

John chuckled, opening his mouth to reply, and then lapsed into another coughing fit, Sherlock grabbing the entire box of tissues and placing it down between them.

It was half-term, time for the annual trip to Sherlock’s reclusive aunt’s house in Sussex, and John had—rather selfishly, in Sherlock’s opinion—picked that week to get the flu, escaping all the cheek-pinchling and ‘My, how you’ve grown!’.

“You went without me before,” John croaked when he could, clearing his throat. “Before we met.”

“I don’t remember,” Sherlock clipped, and John huffed a gentle laugh, likely unaware Sherlock had been serious.

He’d met John when he was five, their first day of primary school, and now, at 11, he could no longer remember the time before him. Even memories he had from before, memories he knew John couldn’t possibly have been included in, he had inserted him somehow, a shadowy blond figure in the background while he blew out candles or got dragged along to Mycroft’s piano concerts.

“Hey, can you do me a favor?” John asked, pulling Sherlock out of his thoughts to meet the sick-sheened eyes.
Sherlock tilted his head inquiringly, and John cleared his throat, shuffling a bit further upright against the pillows behind his back.

“You know that tree? Out back at your aunt’s?” he said, and Sherlock frowned, brow furrowing curiously.

“The one you fell out of?” Sherlock asked, remembering when John had broken his arm a few years ago. Sherlock had drawn an anatomically correct rendering of the bones on the cast, complete with fracture, and John still had it in his closet, boxed away on an upper shelf.

“Yeah,” John replied, nodding. “You think- Can you take a picture for me?” His already flushed cheeks darkened a little as he dropped his head, looking up at Sherlock through his lashes. “It’s just-It’s always changing color right about now, and- I dunno,” he murmured, shrugging, “I’d just like to see it.”

“Oh,” Sherlock replied, blinking at him, “yeah. Yeah, of-course.” He nodded, and John smiled softly up at him, sending something twisting in Sherlock’s stomach. Maybe he was getting sick now too.

“You should go,” John said, snapping up a tissue and dabbing at his nose. “You probably haven’t packed yet.”

“I started,” Sherlock murmured back, and John laughed weakly before a cough overtook it. Sherlock smiled at him, sliding off the bed to stand at the edge. “I’ll be back Friday,” he reminded, and John bobbed his head as he swallowed. “Get better before school starts again.”

John laughed, shaking his head as he rolled it against the pillow toward him. “I don’t think even you can boss my immune system, Sherlock,” he said, smiling up at him fondly, and then chuckled as Sherlock scoffed.

He then hovered, caught in the blue of John’s eyes a moment before he managed to take a step back, clearing his throat. “I’ll, um- I’ll text you,” he assured, and John’s mouth quirked up as he nodded.

“Have fun,” he bade, lifting his hand in farewell, and Sherlock returned it, shuffling out the door and popping a quick goodbye into the kitchen for Mrs. Watson before starting off down to the street.

His house wasn’t far away, but the distance felt wider today, his steps heavier with the weight of the upcoming week already bearing down on him. Thinking about it now, he couldn’t remember when he and John had ever been apart for that long, not since they’d met. John’s family didn’t go on vacations, and Sherlock had always dragged him along on his, making this separation unprecedented, the prospect prompting something cold to sweep through his chest. He could text him, at least, but it wasn’t the same, wasn’t any real substitute for having John there to subtly eat his asparagus when his aunt insisted he try it—perpetually forgetting his hatred for the vegetable. Sherlock supposed he could always pretend to be sick, start coughing and hobbling around until his mother took pity on him and offered him an invitation to stay behind, but John had asked him to get that picture, and, though he would surely have understood, Sherlock would have felt guilty about it, unable to do even that small thing John asked when John never asked for much of anything.

Starting up the drive of his house, he looked around, hands in his pockets as a brisk autumn wind whipped up the path. Leaves swirled past him, plucked from their branches by the breeze, and Sherlock stopped, snatching one from the air. The leaf was cold in his hand, the skin still smooth, and he turned it over in his fingers, examining the fire-hued surface. He then stilled, an idea occurring to him as he looked intently down at the veins forking through the red and yellow, and then he took off at a run, leaf abandoned back to the wind.
Bursting through the door, he tossed an apology to a startled Mrs. Hudson—the housekeeper they had only recently hired, but who had already made a place for herself in their midst—and the woman tutted at him, shouting out a warning to be careful as he raced down the corridor. With no time left for pleasantries, their departure planned for as soon as his mother got back from work, Sherlock flung open the door of Mycroft’s room, startling his brother into dropping the shirt he had been transporting between his wardrobe and the suitcase on his bed.

“Sherlock!” he gasped, bending to snap it back up. “What are you-”

“I need you to take me somewhere,” he blurted, and Mycroft frowned, tilting his head.

“Take you somewhere?” he asked, tossing the shirt onto the bed as he approached. “Where?”


Mycroft raised a skeptical eyebrow, and then turned back to his packing. “Mother will be back soon, Sherlock,” he said, slipping the shirt into his bag, “and you still have to pack. Whatever you need, we’ll pick it up on the way.”

“They’ll be closed by then!” Sherlock exclaimed, stepping further inside, and Mycroft turned to him, eyes widening in surprise. Sherlock blinked, mouth moving tremulously in hesitation. “I- Please?” he asked, and Mycroft turned to him, brow furrowed.

“What is it you need exactly?” he asked, and Sherlock dropped his head, shuffling his feet against the carpet.

“I- Stuff.”

“Sherlock.”

“Just some stuff,” he insisted, voice rising a bit more than he would’ve liked, and Mycroft quirked an imperious brow. Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes. “There’s something I wanna do at Aunt Paige’s,” he mumbled, hands twisting in the fabric of his coat at his sides. “For-For John.”

“For John?” Mycroft pressed, tilting his head. “What could you possibly-”

“Are you gonna take me or not?” Sherlock snapped, glaring at him, because Mycroft was 18, but Sherlock could still always ask the driver. Or Mrs. Hudson, she would certainly be sympathetic to his plight.

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed, roving over Sherlock’s face in critical examination, and then he smiled, just the barest twitch of his lips. He moved to his desk, pulling the jacket off the back of his chair before fishing his keys out of the pocket. “Alright,” he said, slipping his arms in the sleeves as he crossed back to Sherlock, who grinned, “but it better not take very long. Mother will kill you if you make us late again.”

“Again!?” Sherlock spluttered, but Mycroft breezed past him, and he had no choice but to chase after him down the corridor.

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Sherlock didn’t even go inside when they arrived home at the end of the week, leaving his mother and Mycroft to unload his things as he bolted from the car, taking off at a run down the street. The box in his hands rattled as he raced down the pavement, and he tried to steady it as best he could without sacrificing speed, arriving at John’s front door in record time. He rang the bell, and Mrs.
Watson answered almost immediately, smiling down at him.

“I just sent him upstairs to lie down,” she said, opening the door for Sherlock. “He’ll be so upset; he’s been waiting by the window for hours.”

“Thank you!” Sherlock called behind him, thumping up the stairs two at a time, and Mrs. Watson chuckled, shaking her head at him before returning into the kitchen, which smelled strongly of sugar cookies Sherlock was hopeful would be making an appearance soon. He threw open the door of John’s room, and promptly nearly knocked him over, the blond having already been approaching the door.

“Woah!” he blurted, stumbling back to fall on the edge of the bed. “Where’s the fire?” he joked, and he looked better, a little more like himself, eyes bright blue and skin healthily tan once more.

Sherlock faltered, his brilliant idea suddenly seeming silly, and he hovered in the entryway, fingers shifting on the edges of the box within them.

John frowned, confused by his silence, and then noticed the container, lifting his hand to wave toward it. “What’s that?” he asked, and Sherlock couldn’t get out of it now.

He moved forward, John shuffling back cross-legged on the bed to allow him room, and Sherlock climbed up onto the mattress in front of him, box placed between them. “I-I brought you something,” he muttered lamely, nudging the box toward John’s legs.

Hesitantly, John extended his hands, flicking a curious look between Sherlock and the lid before he lifted it. He froze a moment, eyes widening and lips parting as he looked down at the contents, and then gently sat the lid aside, fingers quivering slightly as they reached within. The leaf caught the light as John lifted it, twisting it in front of his eyes as he looked wonderingly over the bright surface, and then he lowered it, fixing Sherlock with a curious look.

“They’re from that tree,” Sherlock explained, flicking weakly at the side of the box. “I-Mum helped me with the decoupage, and Mycroft picked a few off the higher branches.”

John looked back down to the box, replacing the leaf in his hand inside before removing a smaller yellow one in its stead. “You- Why?” he asked breathlessly, shaking his head softly as he lifted his searching blue eyes to Sherlock’s.

Sherlock opened his mouth, hesitating a moment, the question prompting deeper consideration than John had likely intended. “Because you couldn’t be there,” he opted to reply, and John smiled, dropping his face back to the leaves.

“I- Thank you,” he said, looking up at Sherlock, breathtakingly fond. “This is- Nobody-” He dropped his head back to the box, and then snapped his face up again, eyes wide. “We could do this!” he urged, pointing down at the foliage. “Every year, we could go up and get some leaves! And then we’ll keep them—maybe in separate boxes so we can tell them apart—and-and it’ll be like a tradition! Every half-term! Or, you know, whatever it is when we get to uni and stuff.”

Sherlock smiled at his eagerness, nodding weakly as he dropped his head. “Yeah,” he agreed, somewhat stilted, “we could-we could do that.”
“What?” John asked, frowning as he leaned forward to catch Sherlock’s eye. “What’s wrong? Do you—do you not wanna do it?”

“No, I—I just—” He looked up, meeting John’s expectant eyes, and then sighed, shaking his head as he smiled softly. “Nothing,” he said, “it—it’s nothing. That sounds like a great idea.”

“You don’t think I’ll do it,” John surmised, soft and certain, and Sherlock’s eyes ducked away across the mattress.

“It’s not that, I just—”

“What?” John pressed, and Sherlock snapped his face back to him, startled by the hurt contained there. “You don’t think we’re gonna be friends?” he asked, chuckling slightly, as if the thought were ridiculous, but Sherlock tucked his face, biting guiltily at his lip. “You—You don’t,” John breathed, and Sherlock kept his eyes pointedly fixed on the duvet. “You don’t think we’ll stay friends.”

“It’s not you,” Sherlock tried to ease, but John broke in.

“Then what?” he snapped, and Sherlock flinched.

He didn’t doubt John, not at all, but he had seen too much of people, seen too much in them to blindly believe in anyone anymore. When his father had died, everyone had come out in droves, offering their support and pledging promises, but they had all just as quickly trickled away, leaving them with a freezer full of lasagna and little else. Even Sherlock’s own friends throughout the years had vanished, abandoning him as soon as he said something he shouldn’t’ve, noticed something they’d meant to keep secret, and, though John had yet to call him a freak and storm away, Sherlock wasn’t in the habit of counting on anyone.

“I just—” he stammered,shrugging weakly. “Things change,” he explained, flicking a look across at John through his lashes, “we—we don’t know what’ll happen.”

“But we’ll always be friends,” John countered fiercely. “I mean, yeah, stuff will change, but—Well, don’t you wanna be friends?”

“Of course, I do!”

“Then why does it matter?”

Sherlock looked up, John shaking his head at him, but he was no longer angry, just earnest.

“Sherlock, we’ve been friends through a lot of stuff,” he said, eyes soft and sincere. “I mean, I practically lived at your house when my parents were going through their divorce.”

Sherlock dropped his eyes to the grey cotton, those months not something he liked to dwell on, the countless nights spent pretending to be asleep while John wept quietly in the bed beside him.

“And—And your dad,” he added gently, and Sherlock swallowed. There was a sigh above him, and John’s hand reached out, touching lightly over Sherlock’s where it tugged at the duvet. “Sherlock,” he urged, smiling tenderly, “if we can get through all of that”—he shook his head, chuckling lightly—“I don’t think uni’s gonna be a problem.”

Sherlock looked up at him, a hesitant hope rising in his chest as he looked back down into the box of leaves between them, the preserved pieces staring back at him like living flames.

He had no way of knowing in that moment that they would be back to that tree, climbing the
branches and picking out the best leaves, an endeavor that would sprain his ankle at 13 when a branch broke and he toppled out of it.

At 15, John would gather up a handful of the rejects, tossing them in Sherlock’s face and laughing when they caught in his hair, and then he would kiss him for the very first time, a fleeting brush of lips beneath the canopy.

The fall before they headed off to university, Sherlock would mumble through an explanation of Mrs. Hudson inheriting some flats at Baker Street, and John would cut him off, demanding his own room they would never end up using.

25 would find Sherlock alone, picking the leaves himself before sending them off in letters and care packages he couldn’t be sure would ever arrive, but Mycroft always managed to get them there—though he never admitted to intervening—and John would carry them in his pockets on patrols.

The tree would see Sherlock cry at 28, still in his suit after his mother’s funeral, and still alone, John somewhere he couldn’t know and unable to be reached. Sherlock would blame him, and John would understand, and the tree stood alone for a while, leaves living and dying with no one there to mark their passage.

32 and autumn is spent in a hospital, John reaching out to take his hand again, tracing slow circles over Sherlock’s skin while the brunette sobs against his chest.

At 33, the boxes begin again, and, finally, the cold stiffening their 60 year old joints, they’ll sit on the bench they’ve placed beneath the branches Sherlock now owns, the house in Sussex bequeathed to him by his aunt upon her death years ago.

Sherlock didn’t know any of that now, however, only knew the steady warmth of John’s hand over his, the faith in his soft blue eyes, and, in spite of his doubt, he nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, smiling back at the blond. “Yeah, you’re-you’re probably right.”

John grinned, giving his hand a brief squeeze before pulling away. “Come on,” he said, snatching up the box as he rolled off the opposite edge of the mattress, placing it delicately on his desk before turning back to Sherlock. “The new Doctor Who is recorded, and I didn’t wanna watch it without you.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked, rising from the bed and following John out the door. “You know I don’t really like it.”

“No,” John drawled as they descended the stairs toward the living room, “I know you do. No matter how much you complain about it.”

Sherlock glared at him, cheeks flushing, and John laughed, waving him into the kitchen to sneak a few cookies before huddling in front of the television, their shoulders brushing together with every breath.
The Queer Clique

Chapter Summary

Prompt: Teenlock. Mary and Irene go camping with John and Sherlock tell ghost stories and then proceed to purposefully freak John and Sherlock out (scary noises, scratching on their tent) in order scare them because they're trying to finally set them up together. It works. Awkward John and Sherlock sharing a tent together. And Sherlock is a camping virgin who forgets to bring a sleeping bag - monwatson

Prompt: Can we get some matchmaker Irene? - anonymous

So, by popular demand, I am going to be doing a 25 Days of Christmas thing like this as well! I'm going to get more official about calling for prompts on my tumblr around mid/late November, but, if you'd prefer to send in yours here, you can do that at any point from here on out.

“Camping,” John said flatly, quirking an eyebrow.

Irene nodded enthusiastically. “Yep! Mary and I wanted to go all summer, but never got around to it, so we figured why not do it over break!?” She lifted her hands to her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, beaming at him.

“Because it’s cold?” he offered, but Irene barreled on.

“And then we figured why not invite our two favorite guys?” she chirped, nudging John lightly at the shoulder, and John blinked down at the contact, nonplussed by the demeanor. “Won’t it be fun!? The four of us all alone in the woods, making s’mores and telling scary stories!”

“You do realize that’s how most horror movies start, right?” John muttered, and Irene’s smile shifted to a sneer. “Come on, Irene, what’s really going on?” he pressed, eyes narrowing at the woman’s, which blinked in suspicious innocence. “You’ve never invited us to anything before, and, to be perfectly frank, you don’t seem the camping type.”

Irene’s painted mouth dropped open in offense. “I-I just thought it would be nice,” she spluttered, and the hurt would almost look genuine if John didn’t know her better. “We were all so busy getting reading to start uni over the summer, we never saw each other. I just wanted to get the gang back together. Me, Mary, you, and Sherlock.”

“And Sherlock’ what?” Sherlock approached from behind John’s chair, perching on the arm of it as he looked down to Irene on the sofa in their commandeered corner of the coffee shop. “What about Sherlock?”

“Irene,” John started, waving a hand at the woman, “wants to go camping this weekend.” He shot a pointed look up at his roommate, who frowned.

“Camping?” Sherlock repeated, and John nodded. Sherlock then turned to Irene, eyes narrowing. “What are you up to?” he snapped, and Irene sighed, rolling her eyes.
“Honestly, you two,” she huffed, standing up and weaving past Sherlock’s legs. “So suspicious. Can’t a girl just miss her friends?”

“No,” John and Sherlock replied in tandem, exchanging brief smiles at the synchronicity, and Irene wretched.

“You two are ridiculous,” she grumbled, and they both tilted their heads. Irene rolled her eyes again. “I’ll pick you up at 8am Saturday morning,” she said over her shoulder as she headed for the door. “Don’t be late. And don’t worry about tents and sleeping bags and such, Mary’s dad’s loaning us all that stuff. Just bring clothes and whatever else you’ll need. Oh, and your charming selves, of course,” she added with a lecherous grin. “See ya!” She waggled her fingers at them, turning to the door with a wink, and then pushed outside, pulling her red scarf up over her mouth as she walked away against the wind.

“She’s planning something,” Sherlock said ominously, eyes still fixed on the window Irene had disappeared from.

“Yes,” John replied, and then returned to his coffee. Automatically, he broke off a corner of his scone, passing it up to Sherlock, who took it without comment or thanks, the gesture too routine to warrant pleasantries.

“Do you wanna go?” he asked, nibbling on the piece, his other hand cupped beneath his chin to catch crumbs.

John shrugged. “I dunno, it might be fun,” he mused, smiling up when Sherlock scoffed. “And, besides,” he added, carrying his cup with him as he leaned back in the chair, “I don’t fancy finding out what she’ll do if we refuse.”

Sherlock dipped his head, brows lifting in concession to the point. “So we’re going camping,” he said, holding down his piece of scone, and John moved his coffee cup over, holding it aloft while Sherlock dipped the chocolate chip pastry.

“We’re going camping,” he affirmed, lifting his cup in salute as Sherlock tipped his scone, and then they laughed, Sherlock finishing the bite while John sipped. “Okay, so,” he said, clearing his throat as he lowered his cup back to the saucer on the table, “we have to figure out what we’re doing for Mrs. Hudson’s birthday.”

Sherlock groaned, folding his neck back as he tipped his face to the ceiling.

“No, come on,” John coaxed, turning toward him in the chair. “She’s our landlady now. We should do something a little nicer than the usual M&S scarf and glove set.”

“Like what?” Sherlock asked, shrugging a shoulder.

“Well,” John chirped, lifting his hips as he fished his phone out of his pocket, “I was looking online and-” He broke off as Sherlock slid down the arm of the chair, slotting in beside John on the cushion as he forced him aside. “Do you mind?” he muttered, looking up at the man.

“Not particularly,” Sherlock replied, and John laughed, shaking his head as Sherlock snatched his phone away and began flipping through the gift ideas he had bookmarked.

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A car door slammed, jarring John awake, and he startled, banging his head against the window. Hissing in pain, he rubbed a hand to his skull as he made to sit up, but the endeavor quickly proved
pointless, a detective’s worth of deadweight pressed against his side.

Sherlock must have fallen asleep at some point after John, and was now leaning against his shoulder, whole body slumped against John’s side.

John smiled, shaking his head down at the top of the man’s before lifting his eyes to their surroundings.

They were in the middle of nowhere, as far as John could tell, tall trees stretching up all around Irene’s SUV. The front seat was abandoned, Irene and Mary standing near the back of the car, apparently having some sort of argument, but John could not make out the words through the glass.

He sighed, and then turned his attention back to Sherlock, shifting gently to free his right arm. “Sherlock?” he coaxed, rattling the man’s leg by the knee.

Sherlock made a soft sound, a disgruntled sort of whimper against waking, and John had to bite down hard on his lip to keep from shaking with laughter.

“Sherlock?” he tried again, pushing the man a little harder, and Sherlock swatted sleepily at his arm, knocking it away.

John puffed a laugh into the man’s hair, and then turned a bit further, Sherlock’s head now pillowed on his collarbone. “Hey, Sherlock?” he said, this time stroking lightly at the brunette’s chin.

Sherlock sucked in a breath, eyes blinking open, slits of blue-grey peering up through dark lashes, and John’s hand fell away as his stomach seized. “What?” Sherlock mumbled, pulling his head from John’s shoulder as he squinted around. “Are we there?”

“I-I think so,” John replied, swallowing hard as he averted his eyes, taking a deep breath toward the window. “Wherever here is,” he added, peering up toward the tops of the towering pines.

Suddenly, the opposite door swept open, Sherlock nearly jumping into his lap as they spun toward it.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauties!” she chirped, grinning brightly as she looked between them. “Nice to see you finally decided to join us. Oh, and you might wanna check your shoulder,” she added in a stage whisper, nodding toward John. “It looked like he was drooling in some of the pictures.”

“I don’t drool!” Sherlock spluttered at the same time John shouted “You took pictures!?”

Irene didn’t reply to either of them, only smirked, tilting her head as she withdrew. “Come on, give us a hand,” she said, beckoning with a flick of her fingers, and, grumbling, they followed.

“Oh, good, you’re awake!” Mary said as they rounded toward the boot. “Did you check your shoulder?” she added to John, who opened his mouth to reply, but Sherlock beat him to it.

“I don’t drool!” he exclaimed, and Mary laughed.

“Here,” she said, handing the brunette what appeared to be a tent kit. “That’s yours. Irene’s setting ours up over there”—she pointed to where Irene was, indeed, unzipping the package and beginning to pull out various rods and sheets of polyester—“and we figured that would be a good spot for a fire pit, so over there might be best for you.” She waved to a patch of relatively flat, clear ground a little ways behind them, an ideal spot to set up camp, but John could see Sherlock hesitating, resentful of having to take the suggestion, however good it was.

“I’ll do it,” he said, moving up to take the tent from Sherlock, who flashed him as close to a grateful
look as he ever managed. He moved to the indicated spot, crouching down to the ground as he unfolded the various parts, and was about halfway through the process when a shout from behind him drew his attention.

“You what!?” Sherlock spouted, glaring furiously at Irene, who only crossed her arms.

“It was an honest mistake,” she snipped, words crackling over her red lips, and John drew closer, hovering around the exterior with Mary.

“Ten on Irene,” the blonde muttered, leaning across toward him, and John chuckled, but shook his head.

“I’m not taking that bet,” he answered, and Mary turned, grinning at him briefly before they both focused back on the altercation.

“Like hell!” Sherlock snarled, and John’s eyes widened, unaccustomed to even that level of profanity from his longtime friend. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, Irene, but-”

Irene cleared her throat, bobbing a nod back over her shoulder, and Sherlock turned, eyes widening when they landed on John.

“What?” John asked, frowning between the two brunettes.

Sherlock blinked, looking away to the ground a moment as he took a breath. “Apparently,” he snapped, flicking a glare back to Irene, “one of the sleeping bags got left at Mary’s place, and Irene”—he flailed an arm back at her—“has graciously volunteered us to share.”

John hoped he didn’t look as nauseous as he felt. “What?” he croaked, and Irene sighed, rolling her eyes.

“It’s a big sleeping bag,” she said dismissively, “you’ll be fine.”

“Why can’t you two share?” John asked, waving between Mary and the woman, his heart playing allegro against his ribs.

“What, and let one of you use my sleeping bag?” Irene snipped, but Mary intervened before John could reply.

“Our sleeping bags are kind of small,” she said, tipping her head sympathetically at John. “I don’t think Sherlock would even fit in one.”

“I’d make do,” Sherlock muttered, but Irene shook her head.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she huffed, rolling her eyes. “It’s going to get cold tonight. You can’t just hang your feet out the bottom.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, as did John, but Irene flicked a hand, silencing them both.

“Just stick pillows down the middle or something if you’re worried,” she dismissed, turning back to her tent.

Sherlock inhaled, stepping toward her again, but John called him off.

“Sherlock,” he said, and the brunette looked back to him, incredulous. John just shook his head. “Just leave it,” he advised, and Sherlock, after a moment of glaring, huffed and stomped away, head rattling in fury. John sighed, turning once again to Mary. “Where’s the sleeping bag?” he asked
tiredly, and the girl bobbed a thumb back at the car.

“In the boot,” she said. “The blue one.”

John nodded, smiling weakly at her, and Mary returned it, almost encouraging. He then moved back to finish setting up the tent, Sherlock pouting where he leaned against a tree above him. “You could help, you know,” John muttered up at him, and Sherlock snapped down a narrow-eyed look.

“That corner isn’t secure,” he clipped, and John hung his head, pushing out a breath at the ground.

“Sherlock, just forget it, alright?” he said exasperatedly, tightening the joints at the corner. “It’s not like we haven’t shared a bed before.”

“This is different.”

“How?” John looked up at him, and Sherlock promptly looked away, jaw tightening as he gazed aimlessly out through the trees.

“That corner isn’t secure,” he snarled, twisting away in a sweep of his coat as he headed down the hill.

“Sherlock!” John called, standing as he stared after him. “Sherlock, come back!” But the boy did not turn, his curls bouncing away through the trees, and John growled, tossing the tent rods to the ground as he spun irritably on his soles.

Irene and Mary were watching him, something slightly guilty in the former’s eyes, and John shot a glare at her.

“How?” he spat, and Irene blinked her eyes away, turning back to the rustling polyester as she continued piecing together their shelter.

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Sherlock had returned at around the time they were setting up the bonfire, something he would likely claim to be a coincidence, but John suspected he had a sixth sense for s’mores. They didn’t get to eat them long before a storm rolled in, however, and they hastily battened down the hatches, shutting themselves inside their respective tents as the first drops began to fall.

They played cards for a while, reverting to their childhood classic of Go Fish as the lightning flashed outside, beating at the trembling green fabric as it tried to infiltrate the halo of LED light cast by their portable lantern, and then John suggested they go to sleep, noting the telltale signs of Sherlock beginning to get even more irritable than usual with exhaustion. The sleeping bag was plenty big enough really, but they couldn’t avoid touching altogether, backs brushing with their breaths as they faced opposite directions, and John was just beginning to drift off where there was an earth-rattling crack of lightning, and Sherlock gasped, bolting upright.

“Did you see that?” he hissed, batting back at John’s shoulder.

“See what?” John mumbled sleepily, rolling over, searching over the blank wall of the tent Sherlock seemed fixed on.

“A shadow. Outside,” he panted, and John groaned, flopping onto his back.

“Sherlock, it’s just the lightning,” he assured, trying to turn back onto his side, but Sherlock tugged him over again.
“No, I saw something!” he insisted, and John huffed, sitting upright.

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?” he snipped. “Start wandering around asking if anyone’s there?”

Sherlock glared at him, and then turned back to the wind-whipped wall. Lightning exploded behind him, silhouetting his curls in silver as the light cast shadows off his cheekbones, and John blinked away, grappling for the lantern for something to do. “No, don’t turn that on!” Sherlock hissed, swatting at his hand. “They’ll know we’re awake.”

John stared at him, frowning slowly. “They?” he asked, and Sherlock swallowed. John sighed, shaking his head, but it was far too endearing to be frustrated over. “Sherlock,” he assured gently, “there’s no one out there. It was probably just a tree branch or something.”

“But-”

“You need to sleep,” John broke in, stretching an arm out to settle his hand softly over the lump of Sherlock’s leg. “You didn’t last night, and you always get jumpy when you go too long without it.”

“I do not,” Sherlock snapped, and then, appropriately, gasped as he whirled round toward another crack of thunder. Sheepishly, he turned his head back to John, who smiled, settling back down onto his pillow.

“Lie down,” he urged, tugging gently at the sleeve of Sherlock’s hoodie—which was actually one of John’s, he noticed now.

With a petulant sigh, Sherlock complied, flopping down in a gust of displaced air that ruffled John’s hair.

John chuckled, shaking his head at the back of Sherlock’s, but he did not turn around as he had before, instead watching the light flickering over Sherlock’s hair, the boy’s neck twitching this way and that as he followed the direction of the thunder.

There was another loud clap, and Sherlock started, face turning up toward the peak of the tent. “John, did you-” he began, rolling his head, and John couldn’t look away fast enough, Sherlock’s eyes immediately narrowing critically on his face.

He swallowed, trying to make himself stop thinking about how pale Sherlock’s skin looked in the scattered flashes of light, how dark his lashes spread out from the molten silver of his eyes, and how much his own heart ached to touch, to know the texture of those unruly curls and follow the arches of those cheeks.

“What?” Sherlock muttered, searching between his eyes, and then he moved closer, shuffling across the pillow, no idea of the turmoil he had set loose in John’s stomach. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

John opened his mouth, but no words came, only faint clicks of hesitation emanating from his dry throat.

“John?” Sherlock pressed, sliding closer still, and John was losing the ability to think about anything but the curve of his lips. “John, are you-”

“Don’t,” John blurted, shooting a hand up between them, planting it on Sherlock’s chest to hold him at bay as he struggled with his breath.
Sherlock frowned, looking down at where John’s fingers pressed over his heart, and then his muscles stiffened, eyes shuttering as he lifted his chin again. “Right,” he clipped, shifting away, and John’s brow furrowed, perplexed by the sudden change, “sorry, I’ll- I’ll just stay over here.” He flashed John a bitter look, tinged with betrayal, and then rolled over, spine taut as it faced John.

John blinked at his back, pouting in confusion. “Sherlock, what-” he began, but the brunette cut him off.

“I don’t really need my pillow,” he snipped, shuffling a bit on the cotton, but made no move to turn around, “if you want to use it.”

“Why would I need your pillow?” John asked, shaking his head as best he could where he lay.

Sherlock’s shoulders shrugged. “I don’t know, to make a barrier? Like Irene said?”

John frowned at the back of his head, sliding tentatively closer. “Why would I wanna do that?”

“I don’t know, John,” Sherlock snapped, spinning back around to glare at him, “but I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable?” John parroted, pushing up onto an elbow as he looked down at the man. “Why would you make me uncomfortable?”

Sherlock gaped at him incredulously, and then huffed, rattling his head. “Forget it,” he muttered, attempting to turn back over, but John grabbed at his shoulder.

“No!” he sputtered, and Sherlock remained on his back, but his jaw was set, eyes stubbornly fixed on the ceiling. “What are you talking about? Why are you mad?”

“I’m not mad,” Sherlock spat, and John tipped his head down at him, unamused.

“Sherlock,” he said, and the brunette pointedly turned his head away. “Sherlock, come on. Tell me. What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock snapped, but his eyes said otherwise, burning with bitter hurt as they flashed up at him.

“Nothing?” Sherlock exclaimed suddenly, furious face spinning back to John’s, and John recoiled, staring down in shock. “It’s nothing, alright? So just…lie back down and-and go to sleep, and I promise I’ll stay on my side,” he spat, and then swirled back to face the opposite direction with hair-flipping dramatics that might have been comical under any other circumstances, but now just put a pit in John’s stomach.

He should have known, really, should have seen it from the second Sherlock started his argument with Irene, but he hadn’t thought of it, had been so wrapped up in his own demons, he’d forgotten Sherlock’s.

Sherlock had told him he was gay years ago. John hadn’t cared, of course, and everything had continued just the same, but John had never returned the favor, had never told Sherlock that he wasn’t exactly as straight as his rugby-playing, girl-dating exterior let on. To be fair, he thought he had been straight, thought there had been nothing to tell, but then he’d watched Sherlock leave on some date with some git named Victor Trevor, and it was like an atomic bomb going off, the
realization rocking him almost as much as the jealousy. He’d spent that entire night pacing back-and-forth across the carpet in their living room at Baker Street, trying and failing not to imagine what the pair might be up to. Finally—and he wasn’t proud of it—he’d brought up the manual for their refrigerator online, broken something he saw could be easily fixed, and then called Sherlock in a faux panic over the state of the detective’s latest experiment.

Thankfully, the date had been going horribly, and Sherlock had been too relieved by the reprieve to look too deeply into it, but John had never gotten over it, never been able to entirely settle the slew of emotions that night had let loose. And now, to no one’s surprise, John had gone and made Sherlock think he was homophobic when the real problem was that he couldn’t stop thinking about his mouth. Because of course that happened to him.

“She’s,” he beckoned, but the boy didn’t move. “She’s?” he tried again, bending his leg to knee lightly at the brunette’s thigh.

Sherlock shifted, tugging uncertainly at the top of the sleeping bag, but, though he rolled slightly back toward John, he was still decidedly facing the opposite direction.

John hung his head a moment, pushing out a breath as his heart picked up, because it might as well be now, really, trapped in a tent in a thunderstorm with nothing better to do but take a leap of faith. “Sherlock, turn around,” he accidentally said much more forcefully than he’d intended.

“What?” Sherlock spat, rolling back, and John didn’t let him get any further, couldn’t spare a moment more lest his resolve crumble in the face of fear or Sherlock’s eyes.

John dropped his head, planting his lips firmly atop Sherlock’s, his right hand moving up to the man’s neck for the brief seconds he drew out the kiss. He then pulled away, uncertain, Sherlock frozen beneath him, and he blinked the brunette’s face into focus as he hovered over him, heart rattling through his entire body.

Sherlock’s eyes were impossibly wide, blinking owlishly at him, and John just stared back, waiting. Slowly, Sherlock seemed to come back to himself, confusion starting to crease over his forehead. “I-You-” he stammered, and then closed his mouth, a swallow bobbing down his throat. “So you-”

“Yes,” John interjected, because, if this was going to be humiliating, it might as well be humiliating fast.

Sherlock rattled out a breath, eyes roaming off to the side a moment before they returned. “Are you su-”

“Yes.”

Sherlock’s eyes flew even wider, and then softened, slowly roving over John’s face. “I-” he breathed, almost reverent, and a shiver ran down John’s spine. “Are you really sure, though?” he asked earnestly, and John, after a blink, had to chuckle. “Like really, really sure,” Sherlock continued as John laughed, tucking his chin as he shook his head. “Because, if you’re not- If you don’t-”

“She’s,” John interrupted, slipping his hand up to cup the side of the boy’s jaw, thumb grazing side-to-side along the edge of his chin, “whatever you’re about to say… I do.” He smiled softly down at Sherlock’s shock-slackened face, watching as the grey eyes scanned over him in disbelief. “I really, really do,” he whispered, and Sherlock shuddered, his body quivering faintly beneath John’s as he ducked down to his lips again.
Sherlock responded immediately this time, tipping his head and moving back against John’s mouth, and John groaned, fingers sliding to grip into the curls at the base of the man’s scalp. Sherlock lifted his arm, hand gripping on to John’s shoulder as he tugged him gently closer, and John obliged, moving to straddle one of Sherlock’s legs as he held himself above him, chests pressed flush together. At one point, Sherlock bit lightly at his lower lip, and John snapped a hand down to the boy’s waist, wrapping around him and tugging him up, unable to get quite close enough, and Sherlock gasped, lips pulling away as he panted over John’s mouth.

It was a natural break, both of them taking the time to breathe, but they never strayed far, John touching his forehead to Sherlock’s or grazing his lips in soft presses to his temples or jaw. Sherlock’s hand found its way into his hair at one point, swirling in lazy circles at the top of John’s spine, and the detective chuckled softly as he prompted a shiver, biting at the corner of a self-satisfied smirk.

John opened his mouth, smart remark on the tip of his tongue, but there was a sound at the entrance of the tent, both of them freezing as they turned toward it. Lightning flashed, illuminating a silhouette on the tent wall, and the recognition passed wordlessly between them, the tension in their bodies unwinding.

“Of course,” Sherlock sighed, shaking his head, and John couldn’t help but laugh, rolling off him just as the zipper peeled open.

“I knew it!” Irene cried, tumbling in with a rabid grin, and John cried out as she fell on his ankle, scrambling up the sleeping bag toward them. “Mary was so mad at me, but I knew it, I knew it would work!”

“For the record,” Mary said poking her head around the flap, umbrella held aloft, “I didn’t know about the sleeping bag thing until we got here.”

“My little gay babies!” Irene squealed, splattering water from her rain-soaked hair as she flopped between them, arms outstretched across their bodies. Sherlock snapped a horrified glance to John over the top of her head, but John just shrugged, taken over by laughter.

“Tell me what happened!” Irene asked, propping herself up on her elbows, her bony body squeezing itself into the gap between theirs. “You were talking kinda quiet; it was difficult to hear out there.”

“Oh, really?” Sherlock said, sarcastic with concern. “How inconvenient for you.”

“Apology accepted,” Irene clipped with a nod, and Sherlock gaped at her, sending John into yet another fit of giggles. “Come on, gimme the goods!” she urged, eyes eagerly flicking between them.

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“I knew it! You’ve got that whole take charge, ‘Aye aye, Captain’ thing goin’,’” she assessed, and Sherlock could no longer breathe, he was laughing so hard. “Whereas you,” she continued, rolling a hand to Sherlock, “well, I thought you were a rent boy when we first met, to be honest.”

“What!”? Sherlock spouted, and John was actually crying now. “Why would you- John!”

“I’m sorry,” John wheezed, shaking his head as he tried his best to look apologetic at Sherlock’s
“Okay, but seriously,” Irene said, swatting them both gently on the shoulder, “I wanna know. I didn’t go to all this trouble to make us the Great Gay Quartet for nothing.”

That sobered John rather quickly. “Wait, what?” he questioned, frowning at the woman. “Quartet, what-what do you-” Slowly, eyes widening, he turned toward the tent door, finding Mary biting her lip at the ground, cheeks flushing. His mouth dropped open, and it took him a moment to summon his faculties enough for words. “Oh my GOD!” he shouted, and now Sherlock was laughing, head thrown back against the pillow as he shook. “You-You and- YOU!?"

“Honestly, John,” Irene huffed, rolling her eyes, “are you really that obtuse? Although, to be fair,” she muttered, tipping her head, “you didn’t even know you were gay, so-”

“Hey!” he spluttered, but Irene only waved a hand at him, Sherlock being absolutely no help as he continued to soundlessly quake.

“Now, on to more pressing matters,” she said, folding her hands beneath her chin. “Can either of you play an instrument? Because I think we have a really great setup for a band here. I like The Queer Clique, but we can figure that out later.”

John groaned, pressing his hands into his eyes, regretting every decision he had ever made that had in any way led to this moment.

Sherlock continued laughing softly at his side, and John turned, rolling his head on the pillow. The detective smiled across at him, eyes bright and cheeks flushed as he shrugged resignedly at Irene chattering on about song titles, and John’s stomach fluttered, a slow smile building on his face in return.

Well, maybe not quite *every* decision.
Go Get 'Em, Tiger

Chapter Summary

This is less a specific prompt, and more a spin-off of a reference from the previous chapter that you guys really liked. That being said, all your matchmaking, sexy costumes, jealous!John needs will be met. But especially the jealous!John ones.

Again, I am going to be doing a 25 Days of Christmas thing like this as well. I'll get more official about calling for prompts on my tumblr around mid/late November, but, if you'd prefer to send in yours here, you can do that at any point from here on out.

John sat at the table in the living room of 221B, books and papers littered across the surface in front of him. At his side, he had a veritable arsenal of pens, pencils, and every color highlighter WHSmith had had, meticulously going through his notes to mark the important passages. Midterms were upon them, creeping closer with every arc of the sun, and, while he was in his second year now—and thus a little less frantic about the whole thing—the classes were only getting tougher, and he had made plans to shut himself away the weekend, interrupted only by the likely necessity of rushing to the kitchen to put out one of Sherlock’s fires. Literally.

Sherlock and John had known one another since John had moved to London with his mother halfway through secondary school. John had been assigned the seat in front of Sherlock in one of their classes, had been too stubborn to request to be moved as Sherlock perpetually kicked the legs of his desk for the first week, and then, finally, Sherlock had apparently been impressed enough to ask his name. The rest of his origin story, Sherlock had deduced, and so began a friendship bemoaned of teachers—and sometimes police officers—that had led them here, sharing a flat while they picked their way through their respective universities.

Sherlock was going to Imperial for chemistry, John to Bart’s for medicine, but they always made time for Doctor Who marathons on the weekends, and coordinated their class schedules every semester to be able to meet for lunch or coffee at some point during at least two weekdays. They were close, perhaps closer than most, but John didn’t mind, and neither, it seemed, did Sherlock, always rushing in and bouncing him awake in the wee hours of the morning whenever he successfully completed an experiment. And John would always hobble out, rubbing his eyes and forcing himself not to yawn as Sherlock talked him through his process and showed him the final spreadsheet until, finally, he would notice John was dead on his feet and deign to allow him to go back to sleep.

It was an odd normal, but it was theirs, and, somehow, it balanced out pretty well.

The detective himself stumbled into the kitchen, tugging on a low black boot with one hand while the other braced him up against the edge of the dining/experiment table. “Kettle on?” he asked, and John bobbed a nod.

“We just boiled it,” he replied, tapping the side of his cup for emphasis, and Sherlock tipped his chin in acknowledgement, moving out from behind the table toward the kettle, and John spun around in his chair, frowning perplexedly.

In addition to the low black boots, Sherlock was wearing draped black trousers tucked into them, a
loose white button-down hanging down toward his hips. There was a thick black belt with a polished silver buckle wrapped around his waist, a sword holster hanging off the side with a long faux dagger held within, and John tilted his head at him, blinking excessively.

“Okay, are you a pirate right now, or have I been staring at this book for way too long?” John muttered, and Sherlock chuckled, swallowing down a mouthful of freshly brewed tea.

“Both,” he replied teasingly over the brim of his cup, and John smiled, rolling his eyes.

“So, why exactly are you a pirate?” he asked, and Sherlock crossed the room, perching on the edge of the table beside him as he sipped at his tea.

“I told you,” he replied, twisting to flick at a few pages of John’s notes, “I’m going to that Halloween party downtown.”

“That’s tonight?” John asked, surprised, and Sherlock nodded, raising a brow down at him. John sighed, running a hand through his hair as he slumped against the back of the chair. “Wow, Halloween already,” he mused, and Sherlock chuckled. He then looked up, brow furrowed at the detective. “Are you going by yourself?” he inquired, leaning up toward him. “Because I can go with you. Wrap myself in toilet paper real quick or something.”

Sherlock smiled, but shook his head, swallowing another sip. “No, I’m not; I’m going with someone from class. You know, the guy Irene went to secondary school with?”

John nodded vaguely, frowning in thought. “Yeah, I think I remember you two talking about it. Some stock market guy, right?”

“For all intents and purposes,” Sherlock affirmed, shrugging as he slipped off the desk. “His father’s a broker.” He patted at his pockets, a frown forming on his pale face, and John tried to stamp down a smirk as he watched.

“Lost your phone again?” he mocked, and Sherlock sneered. With a soft chuckle, John plucked his own off the table. “I’ll call it,” he said, compressing Sherlock’s speed dial—2, voicemail being the automatic 1. “It’s probably in your room.”

Sherlock hummed in distracted agreement, taking off down the corridor toward his room, and John smiled, shaking his head at the back of the boy’s.

There was a sound from downstairs, the front door opening and clicking closed, and John stood up warily, moving around the edge of the table to face the doorway.

“Hello?” a voice called, and John was about to open his mouth and demand a name when Sherlock’s head popped out of his door down the hall.

“That’s probably him,” he said, turning his head as if to see through the wall to downstairs. “I’ll be right out, just…entertain him for a second.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” John protested, waving a hand toward the staircase, where footsteps were now ascending. “I don’t even know the guy!”

“I don’t know, interpretive dance?” Sherlock taunted, smirking at John’s glare before closing the door between them.

“Hello?”
John snapped his head to the doorway, a blond Jack Harkness staring back at him.

“Sorry,” the man said, brown eyes twinkling over a sheepish smile, “the door was open.”

“Yeah, it usually is,” John muttered, tipping his head. He stepped forward, extending a hand as he smiled politely at the stranger. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m John, John Watson,” he said, and the man nodded thoughtfully as his palm pressed against John’s.

“Yeah, you’re on the rugby team, right? For Bart’s?” he asked, and John smiled as their hands pulled apart.

“That’s right,” he replied. “You play?”

“Oh, no,” the man chuckled, waving his hands in front of him. “Not really my thing. Don’t mind watching though,” he added with a smirk that made John instantly suspicious. “I’m Victor, by the way,” he continued, brushing a hand against his chest. “Victor Trevor. I’m in one of Sherlock’s classes at Imperial.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that,” John said as airily as he could manage, crossing his arms defensively. “I guess you know Irene as well?”

Victor laughed, and something about it bristled at John’s shoulders, pulling them taut. “Yeah, Irene and I go way back. Crashed my dad’s Ferrari one summer when we were back from boarding school.”

“Oh?” John inquired, pointedly ignoring the look-at-all-the-money-I-have brand drop. “Which one of you was driving?” he asked, and Victor tilted his head, a frown creasing his brow as he opened his mouth.

“Found it!” Sherlock announced, brandishing his phone aloft as he flung open his door, boots clicking down the corridor toward them. “It was—”

“In your bed?” John surmised, because, for some reason, it was important that he say that, that Ferrari over there knew that he knew Sherlock often fell asleep waiting on a text from one of his informants that was out digging up dirt on his latest case.

Sherlock smiled, slipping the mobile into his pockets as he drew up to complete their triangle. “Oh!“ he said suddenly, spinning back toward his room. “Oyster card!”

“It’s not in there,” John called, and Sherlock turned back to him, brow furrowed. “It’s in the fridge.”

Sherlock frowned, head tilting. “Why would it—”

“How should I know?” John asked, waving his hands as he shrugged, and Sherlock chuckled, moving instead toward the kitchen.

“You won’t need it,” Victor interjected, and they both turned to him, Sherlock’s expression a little more polite in its curiosity than John’s. Victor smiled smugly, slipping his hand into the pocket of his coat. “I drove,” he said, twirling the keys in a single spin around his finger before clasping them in his hand. “Come on,” he beckoned, turning back toward the door and waving an arm, “we’re gonna be late.”

Something thick and cold settled in John’s throat, and he tried to swallow it down as Sherlock passed him, moving out toward the landing as Victor gestured he go ahead.
“Don’t forget to change the-”

“Water in the beakers,” John finished, nodding, and Sherlock smiled at him, a soft, fond thing John tried very hard to reciprocate.

He then left, moving down the stairs, but Victor lingered, watching after him with a small tilt to his head, and John’s fingers clenched to fists.

Victor then turned to John, sly smirk on his face. “Don’t wait up,” he said softly, flashing a wink before he darted down after Sherlock’s steps, and John let out a stilted laugh even as he could feel his internal organs withering.

He stood in the middle of the living room, frozen, and then bolted at the sound of the door closing, leaping to the window and peeling the curtains aside.

The car was parked just outside the flat—illegally, John noted—glinting silver beneath the streetlamps, and his jaw clicked as he watched Sherlock slip into the passenger seat, Victor rounding to the other side.

“Jaguar,” John muttered to himself, fingers twitching a little where they held back the drapes. “Of course.”

In the glow of the interior lights, Sherlock’s head began to turn, and John ducked to the side, moving the curtains back into place until there was only a sliver of space for his eye to peer through. Sherlock looked up at the window, a strange wistfulness passing over his face before he blinked, seeming startled as he turned back toward Victor. A second later, the light dimmed to nothing, and the car roared to life, squealing into motion as it took off down the street.

John watched until it turned the corner—with a rolling stop, he might add—and then twisted away from the window, clutching the edge of the table as he leaned back against it.

So Sherlock had a date. Big deal. Sherlock had gone on dates before. Hadn’t he?

He had gone on dates before, grabbing his coat and bolting out the door with a hollered goodbye up the stairs, but Sherlock? John couldn’t remember anyone, and Sherlock surely would have told him, it having been made clear long ago that John didn’t care whatsoever that his friend was gay.

Was this Sherlock’s first date? Did Sherlock even know it was a date, or did Victor have plans Sherlock wasn’t privy to? Sherlock had brought him up as someone he knew from class, not a friend, exactly, but not a potential romantic prospect either. He probably didn’t even know anything about him, and surely not that he’d crashed a car, or there was no way he would be driving around with him.

Really, it wouldn’t hurt anyone to find out a bit more about this Victor Trevor, so John fished his mobile out of his pocket, slamming down speed dial 6.

“What’s up, Doc?” Irene chirped, but John wasn’t much in the mood for banter.

“What do you know about Victor Trevor?” he asked, fingers tapping against the edge of the table in stiff staccato.

“Nothing,” John muttered, shaking his head as he looked once again toward the corner Sherlock had disappeared around. “It’s just- Well, he and Sherlock are going to that party tonight, and-”

“I knew it!” Irene interjected, and John startled, phone leaping from his ear a moment. “I told him Vic was gunnin’ for him. Didn’t believe me, of course, but, alas, no one ever does. Victor Trevor,” she mused, blowing out a low whistle. “Well, I hope you got a good look at him.”

“Who, Victor?” John asked, and Irene chuckled.

“No, Sherlock,” she corrected, and there was a pop, like a click of her gum. “Probably the last you’ll see of him. This guy Victor dated last year? Vic took him to Monte Carlo for a weekend, just because. Monte Carlo!”

John swallowed as Irene laughed, stomach wriggling as he shifted his grip on the phone.

“I’m tellin’ ya,” she continued, “it’d be hard to say no to those perks.”

“Sherlock’s not like that,” John snapped bitterly, pacing toward the kitchen. “And he has his own money anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Irene allowed, and John’s shoulders lowered just a bit, “but, still, don’t expect him back tonight.”

“Why not?” John asked, feet freezing on the rug.

“Well, because,” Irene chuckled, as if this wasn’t the most important thing in the entire world, “Victor always takes his dates back to his place.”

John couldn’t liken this feeling to anything. It wasn’t like being punched in the stomach, or flattened by a fullback, or even getting hit by a truck, though he had no personal experience with the last one. It was almost like falling from a great height, the way the air swept from your body in one hitching gasp when you hit the ground, and you could only lie there, staring up at the sky and feeling like the whole world had stopped until you managed to struggle through a breath.

“John?” Irene asked, her voice distant and warbled as it twisted around John’s own heartbeat in his ears. “John, are you there? John?”

“Yeah,” John managed to gasp, swallowing uselessly down through his dry throat, “yeah, I’m-I’m here.”

“Are you alright?” she pressed, uncharacteristically soft. “You sound kinda funny.”

“No, I-I’m fine,” he wheezed, and then cleared his throat, fingers twitching in and out of a fist at his side. “I’m fine, I just-” He stopped, uncertain even himself what he was. He felt like he was drowning, like something thick and acrid had been poured into the air around him, suffocating him as he breathed, but what was he supposed to do?

Did Sherlock know? Probably not, considering his lack of a dating history. And Sherlock wasn’t like that, wouldn’t want that, going home with someone he barely even knew. And, all things considered, Sherlock had probably never- Probably was- And what if he got pressured, what if he already felt pressured, what if Ferrari-Monte-Carlo took him back to his flat and-

“Do you know where the party is?” he asked without thinking, but, upon considering it, he entirely approved of the question.
“What?” Irene replied. “Why would you-” She paused, and John winced, eyes already pinching shut in preparation. “No,” she murmured, the shaking of her head audible in the shift of her voice, “oh no, you can’t possibly be-”

“Just for a bit!” John defended, pitch rising. “Just to make sure he’s alright.”

“He’s a grown man!” Irene spat. “If he wants to fuck his way to first class-”

“Irene!” John spluttered, skin crawling at the thought.

“What!” she snapped back. “It’s his decision, John, and none of our business! Especially yours.”

“Why?” John asked, puzzled by the sudden venom of her tone. “Why especially mine?”

“Really?” Irene sniffed, and then sighed at John’s silence. “Nothing,” she muttered tiredly, “forget it.”

“But-”

“I’m not going to tell you where the party is, John,” she interjected, and John nearly cracked his phone in two.

“Why not!” he blustered.

“What are you even going to do, John!” Irene exclaimed. “Charge in there and punch the guy?”

John’s mouth moved soundlessly a moment, and he began to pace, moving between his armchair and the coffee table across the room. “No,” he spluttered, and Irene scoffed. “I don’t know, okay!” he exploded, and the woman fell silent. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do, but I can’t just-just sit here! I can’t just wait around when he could be- when they could be-” He stopped, letting out a frustrated huff of breath as he rattled the image loose. “I’m losing my mind, Irene, I can’t-”

“What does it feel like?”

John stopped, twisting toward the fireplace as he stood at the arm of his chair. “What?” he asked, frowning down at the red upholstery.

“What does it feel like?” she repeated, suddenly calm. “You said you were losing your mind,” she clarified patiently, “so what does it feel like?”

“I- It-” John stammered, and then sighed, wilting into his chair. “Like I’m drowning,” he said, hanging his head, palm pressed into his forehead as he closed his eyes. “Like there’s something squeezing my chest, and I-I feel like I can’t breathe.”

It was silent a long moment, and then Irene let out a shaky breath. “Well, I’ll be damned,” she whispered, and it almost sounded watery. Before John had the chance to ask, however, she continued, brisk and official. “You’ll need a costume,” she said, and John’s spine straightened, eyes widening in surprise, “they won’t let you in otherwise. Mary’s closing at the shop tonight; I’ll call her and tell her we’re coming.”

“So…you’ll help me?” John asked, dazed with relief.

Irene sighed. “I will,” she muttered, and John grinned, “but, if this thing goes south, I will deny we ever had this conversation.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the woman snipped, but John could hear the smile beneath the scorn, “just go. I’ll be at the shop in twenty.”

“Alright,” John confirmed, and then the line went dead.

He didn’t waste any time, grabbing his jacket before darting out the door, locking it hastily behind him before he waved down a cab, the desperate times justifying the splurge. He was at the shop in fifteen minutes, Irene just walking up to the door as he pulled up to the pavement, and she waited for him as he paid the cabbie, eyeing him curiously.

“What?” he asked as he drew up to her side, self-consciously slipping his hands in his pockets.

The woman narrowed her eyes at him, scanning him critically while he fidgeted under the scrutiny, and then simply sniffed, turning on her heels and knocking on the shop door.

The sign said closed, but Mary answered anyway, smiling brightly as she pulled it open to admit them.

“Hey, John,” she greeted, closing and locking the door again behind them before drawing the blinds. “Long time, no see!”

“Hey, Mary,” he said, smiling sheepishly, the ridiculousness of this endeavor hitting him now that the righteous fury was fading. “Thanks for sticking around. I know you could probably get in trouble for this.”

Mary scoffed, batting a hand. “Don’t worry about it. Not like there’s cameras. So!” She clapped her hands together, smiling between them. “Word is you need a costume.”

“Yeah, I-” John started, but Irene broke in.

“My, John!” she said, and John rounded on her as Mary’s jaw dropped. “He wants to crash Sherlock’s date.”

“I just wanna…watch it for a while,” he mumbled, and then blinked, frowning as he looked between the two skeptical women. “It was less creepy when I was crashing it, wasn’t it?” he asked, and there was a round of nodding before Irene barreled on.

“Sherlock and Victor are at that costume party at the club downtown—”

“Wait, Victor?” Mary asked, eyes wide. “As in Victor Trevor? But he’s—”

“Yeah, I’ve heard,” John interrupted, lifting a hand toward her, “and once was enough, thanks.”

Mary tilted her head at him, puzzled, and then blinked, face slowly pulling into an awestruck smile. “Well, I’ll be damned,” she breathed, and John frowned.

“Why does everyone keep—”

“Not now, John,” Irene snapped, and John fell silent, though not without a glare. “You can’t get in without a costume,” she continued to Mary, “so do you have anything left? Preferably something with a full mask.”

“Why a full mask?” John questioned, and Irene sighed, rolling her eyes to the ceiling exasperatedly. “Because otherwise Sherlock will know it’s you,” she explained, and John tipped his head, supposing that made sense. “And I mean full mask,” she added to Mary. “Even the mouth showing,
Sherlock will know it’s him.”

“Well, I don’t know if—”

“He will,” Irene interjected, something pointed in her gaze John couldn’t quite define.

“Don’t worry,” Mary said, eyes twinkling worrisomely as she looked over John, “I think I have just the thing.”

John gulped.

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“I still don’t see what was so wrong with the gorilla suit,” Irene’s voice said through the speaker, and John rolled his eyes, shuffling in the cold as he waited in line outside the club. “He’d never recognize you in that.”

“It smelled like cheese,” John snapped back, and he heard Mary’s giggle drifting in behind Irene’s huff.

After nearly an hour of sorting through racks, trying on everything they threw at him, and getting laughed at enough for the remainder of his life, they’d finally managed to agree on a costume, and Mary and Irene had shooed him on his way, the two of them going back to Irene’s to hole up and demand constant updates.

“I think you look great, John,” Mary reassured, her voice growing louder. “I’d pick Spiderman over Jack Harkness any day.”

“Thanks,” he muttered shyly, almost glad for the mask to hide his blush. He looked down, plucking self-consciously at the tight red and blue fabric over his chest. “Mary, are you sure this is okay?” he asked yet again, examining the web detail on his gloves as he turned his hands over in front of him. “This thing is, like…movie quality!”

“Yes, I’m sure,” she answered, the same response she had given the past dozen times. “I’ll log it back in sometime tomorrow. It’ll be fine. So long as you don’t set yourself on fire.”

“Incineration isn’t covered in the rental agreement,” John muttered, but Mary didn’t laugh.

“No, that material’s highly flammable,” she answered seriously, and John blinked, suddenly aware of how warm his phone was against his ear.

The bouncer—a large man who looked like he’d seen his fair share of crazy already that night—waved John in, and he bobbed his head, pushing through the door after what looked like a couple of fairies.

“Okay, I’m in,” he hissed into the phone, slowing his steps before the music got to be too loud.

“Allright,” Irene said, her voice overtaking again. “Call us if you need to.”

“Why would I—”

“John.”

“Allright, alright,” he sighed, lingering against the wall, “I’ll call if I need anything.”

“Good,” Irene said, and then, as if she could feel his resolve wavering in the silence, she continued.
“Just be honest, John,” she said perplexingly, and John frowned down at the sticky floor.

“Be honest?” he repeated, plugging his other ear as a new song picked up, the bass overwhelming.

“What do you mean? Honest about what?”

“Not what,” Irene explained, raising her voice to overcome the music, “who. Be honest with yourself.”

“About what?” John was practically shouting now, glaring out into the flashing lights as if he could shame the club into silence.

Irene chuckled, the sound nearly disappearing into the din. “Do I have to do all the work?” she teased, and John opened his mouth to reply just as a huge shout came from the other room, startling him back to silence. Irene laughed, loud and clear across the line. “Go get ‘em, Tiger!” she exclaimed, and then the line went dead, the screen flashing over John’s face as he pulled it away.

He snarled, slipping his mobile up his sleeve—the only place to keep anything in the costume—before staring back out into the room.

It was massive, and full of people in costumes, lights of every imaginable color flashing all over the place. To his right was the bar, a beacon of box lighting that shifted colors along the base, and John felt a rush of pity for the bartenders who had to stare at that all night. There was seating beyond the bar, low sofas and tables scattered around, as well as booths along the walls that John would want to take a black light to before sitting on, but the focal point was the dance floor. It wasn’t a raised platform, or anything that inherently set it apart, but a metal framework of lights hanging from the ceiling above blocked off a large rectangle of the room, and that area and more was crammed with writhing bodies.

It was loud and bright and smelled like sweat and liquor, and John wanted very, very much to go home, but he hadn’t come all this way for nothing, hadn’t suffered through Irene giggling as she zipped him into this spandex nightmare to leave empty-handed, so he took in a breath, tried not to gag, and strode forward into the throng.

He didn’t bother checking the dance floor, doubtful even first date version of Sherlock would go that far out of his comfort zone, and headed straight for the bar. Slowly, blending in as best he could, he circled it, scanning the stools, but none of the characters clamoring for drinks were Sherlock or Victor. Frustrated, the noise level putting him a little more on edge every second, he looked aimlessly around the room, spotting a staircase behind them. There was an upper level—more a balcony than anything else—with a handful of extra seating and a lot of people standing, looking out over the edge, and John smiled to himself, heading toward it. He pushed his way to a spot at the railing, the perfect vantage point, and began scanning the crowd, eyes narrowing pointedly over the booths just in case.

“Hey.”

He turned, finding a young woman standing next to him, her body encased in a second skin of a Catwoman costume.

She smiled, teeth glittering in the light, and her blue eyes sparkled out from within her mask. “Just the guy I was looking for,” she said, tilting her head.

John chuckled, hands shifting on the rail in front of him. “Sorry, I-I think you have me confused with someone else.”
“Oh, I don’t know who you are,” she countered, and then suddenly moved forward, prompting a retreating step from John. “That’s the whole point of the mask,” she drawled, smirk lecherous, and John swallowed, eyes blowing wide. “Come on,” she said, hand reaching out to trail soft fingers over his hand on the banister, and John was too stunned to even pull away, “let me buy you a drink.”

“I-” John stammered, looking between her face and the fingers on the back of his hand. “Sorry,” he spluttered, staggering backward, and she blinked in alarm, “wrong universe.” He darted past her, her red lips dropping apart, and bolted back down the stairs, not stopping until he was safely hidden against the wall behind the dance floor.

He leaned against the concrete, breathing up at the ceiling, his heart thundering in his throat, and was just reaching for his sleeve to call Irene and tell her she had the worst ideas when his eyes caught on a sweep of a distinct black coat.

Blond Jack Harkness, 10 o’clock and moving fast.

John shuffled along the wall, following the back of the man’s head as it weaved around the dance floor. Suddenly, it disappeared, dropping down below his eye line, and John practically ran toward the corner, waiting until the small corridor of seating along the back wall came into view. He kept an eye on the spot Victor’s head had vanished, and, sure enough, a petite nurse moved out of the way and he saw them.

Victor was sliding a drink across the table—something dark in a tall glass. His mouth moved, likely telling a joke by the small smirk on his mouth, and Sherlock laughed, taking the drink from Victor’s hands and clubbing John in the chest with a mace at the same time.

They were sitting at a table about halfway across the room, Victor’s chair pulled tighter around the back—closer to Sherlock, but also further into John’s view. They were just talking, really, their mouths taking turns moving as their hands shifted in gesticulation, but John was still seeing red, still wanted to run over there, beat Victor bloody with his own chair, and-and- …and what?

He took in a breath, the sound hissing in his ears in stereo while the rest of the room seemed to go silent.

Why had he come here? Why had he thought any of this would be a good idea, that it would even be necessary? Sherlock was safe, he was fine—maybe even more than fine—and John only felt worse, his hands shaking with something he wanted to call fury, but he wasn’t quite sure he could call this anger anymore, this cold pit hollowing out his stomach as he watched Sherlock duck his head and laugh.

Victor started talking, leaning back in his chair and looking aside as he spoke, and Sherlock pulled his drink up, taking a sip out of the side.

His face twitched, a small indication of displeasure, but he smoothed it as Victor looked back, pulling the glass away and swallowing down the mouthful, and John wanted to hit him.

Why would he do that!? Why would he pretend to like the drink, pretend to like any of this!? Sherlock didn’t drink, he didn’t dance, he didn’t go to clubs, he didn’t even like the TV going at night because the light distracted him, let alone all this neon nonsense. Sherlock didn’t like bars, didn’t like Halloween, didn’t like Jaguars or Monte Carlo or stupid Victor and his stupid hair. He liked Jaffa Cakes and watching thunderstorms roll in from the roof until John physically dragged him down. He liked filling their DVR with detective shows just so he could loudly solve the puzzle before they did, and then watch the rest to gloat at fictional characters. He liked the temperature at precisely 22 degrees, liked his books in height order, his experiment notes in blue and his shopping
lists in black, his alarm clock set 15 minutes earlier than it needed to be, and John.

He liked John.

But he was sitting there with Victor, laughing with Victor, pretending to like a drink for Victor, and John was standing in the corner in a Spiderman suit feeling like a fool with a keen understanding of what it felt like to be stabbed through the heart.

And he had no idea why, why it hurt so much, why it felt like the world was falling apart beneath his feet, but then Victor shuffled his chair a little closer across the floor, and there was no space left in John’s brain to wonder about anything else.

John Watson never panicked.

He was captain and hooker on the rugby team, constantly making split-second decisions and finding a way to pull them off. He was a medical student, teachers watching over his shoulder as he stitched up model after model. He was roommates with the most impulsive person on the planet; he could sleep through explosions now.

But now, as Victor shifted closer, nudging against Sherlock’s arm, and Sherlock looked up toward him, their faces far too close, John Watson panicked. Heart-stopping, palm-sweating, knee-shaking panicked, because Sherlock Holmes was about to be kissed for quite possibly the first time and it couldn’t be in a crowded club with the taste of a drink he hated on his lips.

It couldn’t be Victor Trevor.

Frantic, heart racing and lungs heaving to keep up, John turned, searching around for any solution short of tackling him—which he hadn’t entirely written off. Then, complete with chorus of angels, he saw it.

Along their edge of the room, over the seating, the ceiling was lower, dim lights scattered to sit centered over the booths. Interspersed with the lights were small silver nozzles, glittering in the lights of the club, and, within one of the booths, a man was lighting a cigarette he shouldn’t have, a matchbook in his hand.

John ran for the longshot, jumping into the empty booth behind the man and snatching the matches out from over his shoulder.

“Hey!” the man bleated, thick neck wrinkling as he twisted back, and John ripped off a match, striking it and promptly lighting the whole rest of the book aflame. “What are you doing?” the man demanded as John climbed onto the table, cupping his hand around the sprinkler as he held the flame beneath it, praying to anyone who would listen as he looked over his shoulder to find Victor leaning closer. “What the- Are you insane!” the man bellowed.

John ripped his eyes away, looking up at the flame flickering orange over the silver. “Probably,” he replied, and then the alarm went off.

Water spewed into his face, and he spluttered, extinguished matchbook falling from his hands. Screaming broke out all around him as the sprinklers down the line went off, sending the entire seating area running for cover, and John leapt down into the chaos, elbowing his way through scrambling patrons until he saw one particular damp head of dark curls. He ran past, grabbing Sherlock around the wrist as he went, and then began pulling him toward the exit, water and sirens filling the air around them.

“Hey, what are you- Let me go!” Sherlock sputtered, wrist struggling in John’s hold as his other
hand beat on his back, but John held firm. “Let go of-”

“Sherlock, stop!” John shouted back, spinning to face the detective, wrist still caught in his hand between them.

Sherlock froze, eyes widening as his lips dropped apart, water trailing off the Cupid’s bow. “John?” he breathed, eyes blinking as they roved over John’s face.

John hesitated, and then sighed, releasing Sherlock’s hand and lifting his fingers to the bottom seam of his mask. He ripped it up, shaking his hair loose as the fabric came free, and then his arm fell to his side, mask clutched within a fist.

Sherlock gaped at him, grey eyes blinking, apparently entirely oblivious to the water slowly soaking his shirt transparent. “John, what are you- Why are you-” He blinked, brows twitching together as his forehead furrowed in consideration, and John’s stomach seized, regretting taking the mask off and leaving his facial expression exposed. “Were you following me!” Sherlock blustered, and John’s eyes twitched in a faint flinch. Sherlock stared at him, stunned and slowly angering. “Why on earth would you- Wait.” He paused, eyes narrowing in scrutiny over John’s face, and then he turned back, glancing over his shoulder toward where they had been sitting, and, when he looked back, John knew his face gave the rest of it away. “Did you set the sprinklers off!” he exclaimed.

“Shh!” John hissed, casting a glance side-to-side as he reached out for Sherlock’s arm, but Sherlock jerked away.

“Don’t shush me!” he spat, wrist held far out of reach. “What the hell were you thinking!”

“I-I don’t know,” John muttered, rattling his head. “I-I wasn’t, I just-”

“That’s illegal, John!” Sherlock chided, and John set his jaw, perfectly aware of that, thank you very much. “You could get fined, or-or an ASBO or something! What would possibly possess you to-”

“I panicked, alright!” John snarled, but Sherlock just furrowed his brows down at him.


“YOU!” John shouted, and Sherlock blinked, staggering a half step back. John sighed, shaking his head as he looked away across the floor, hand rattling back through his damp hair. “I- He crashed a car!” John blurted, waving a hand back toward the direction of the abandoned table. “And-And he goes on a lot of dates, like a lot of dates, and they go to Monte Carlo! Monte Carlo!”

Sherlock’s forehead slowly creased as he watched him, confusion bleeding into the shock.

“And you don’t wanna go to Monte Carlo!” John railed on, words rolling straight from the knot in his chest. “Nobody wants to go to Monte Carlo! All that-that sun and-and gambling! It’s immoral!”

“John,” Sherlock eased, lifting a hand, but John wasn’t done, rounding on him, voice tearing desperate from his throat.

“You didn’t even like your drink!” he cried, and Sherlock’s hand fell away, eyes searching between John’s. “Why would you do that?” John asked, voice creaking treacherously. “Why would you drink it if you didn’t like him?”

Sherlock tilted his head, eyebrows pinching together as grey scanned between John’s face and heaving chest. “Him?” he repeated, barely audible over the alarm still blaring above them, and John’s heart skittered to a stop, his lips snapping closed.
“It,” he muttered, swallowing as he slid a step back. “I said it.”

“No, you didn’t,” Sherlock asserted, countering John’s retreat. “You said him. Why would I drink it if I didn’t like him.”

The alarm and sprinklers stopped, people still bustling and shouting around them through the puddles that now littered the floor, but John’s hands weren’t shaking for the cold, his fingers quivering against his thighs as he stared up at Sherlock, mouth shifting soundlessly as the detective advanced.

“Why are you here, John?” he asked, soft and speculative, but the words still ripped into John’s chest like a vice. “Why did you follow me? Why did you set off the sprinklers?”

“I-I told you,” John stammered, stumbling back as the detective advanced, “I just panicked.”


“I-don’t-” John’s mouth fluttered useless, heart thunderous in his ears as he dazedly shook his head.

“Yes, you do!” Sherlock insisted, eyes boring into him. “You know why, John! Why did you panic!?”

“I don’t know!” John bleated, mind a tangle of emotions and images he couldn’t even begin to unravel.

“Stop lying to me!” Sherlock demanded, but his voice broke to pleading. “You know, John!”

“No, I don’t!”

“John!?”

“I DON’T KNOW!”

Sherlock staggered back, shaking water from his hair with the force of it.

John’s hands were trembling in fists at his sides, his entire body pulled taut, ready to shatter at the faintest blow. “I don’t!” he urged, but the words were ragged. “I-I just- I couldn’t do it,” he said, shaking his head, eyes breaking contact to the floor. “I-I couldn’t watch you- Couldn’t let you-”

“What?” Sherlock prompted, and John’s eyes pinched shut, a stiff swallow moving down his parched throat.

“You don’t even know him,” he said, voice brittle as he turned his eyes back to grey ones. “You don’t- He doesn’t care about you.” He waved a limp hand in the general direction of the exit, where customers were still filing out, some sitting in the dry section of the club, too drunk or apathetic to leave. “Not the way he should, not the way- the way-”

“What?” Sherlock prompted, and John’s eyes pinched shut, a stiff swallow moving down his parched throat.

“You don’t even know him,” he said, voice brittle as he turned his eyes back to grey ones. “You don’t- He doesn’t care about you.” He waved a limp hand in the general direction of the exit, where customers were still filing out, some sitting in the dry section of the club, too drunk or apathetic to leave. “Not the way he should, not the way- the way-”

“The way you do?”

John snapped his head up, lips quivering apart, and Sherlock stared back at him, a hurt John couldn’t understand icing over in his eyes.

Suddenly, Sherlock laughed, a weak huff of air through his nose that sounded more dangerous than amused, and he shook his head, looking away to the side. “Unbelievable,” he muttered, jaw stiff. “Unbelievable!”

John startled, eyes blinking wide as Sherlock turned, running a hand back through his hair as he
angled his body away from John’s.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked suddenly, rounding back on John, a broken sort of fury caught in the tense lines of his face. “Why now? All this time, and you-you pick now, now, when I’m finally starting to—” He stalled, mouth trembling to a stop, and then his eyes darted away, face pinched in misery as he swallowed.

John’s lungs were frozen, his body functioning in some sort of anaerobic stasis, and yet, somehow, his heart was still pounding. “Starting to what?” he asked, a tremulous suspicion sparking in his gut.

Sherlock blinked at the ground, the droplets of water caught in his lashes flickering in the light. “Move on,” he answered with a weak shrug. “From- From you.”

What little air remained in John’s lungs panted out, his eyelids fluttering as his vision swam. “You—” he stammered, and Sherlock wouldn’t look at him, head bowed to his shoes, “You wanted- You… like me?”

Sherlock puffed another miserable chuckle, shaking his head at the ground. “No,” he replied, lifting a smile so sad, it didn’t merit the name, “I love you.”

John made no sound, but he felt his mouth drop open, and Sherlock looked away, eyes lost. “How—” John breathed after a time, Sherlock not offering any more. “W-When—”

Sherlock smiled tremulously, eyes flicking back to him a moment. “I don’t know, really,” he replied, shrugging a shoulder. “Maybe always.”

John dragged in a slow breath, exhaling it shakily to the ground. He frowned, head shaking as he lifted his eyes again. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, and Sherlock barked a humorless laugh.

“How—” he mocked, incredulous. “Because you’re straight, John!” he spluttered, waving a hand at him. “Straighter than straight! You are the level they use to measure straight!”

“Well, yeah, but—” John started, but it was Sherlock’s turn to rant now, and the detective railed on, words quickening as his hands flew out in frenzied gestures.

“And it’s ridiculous!” he half-laughed, a manic thing that sounded like it had considered being a sob. “It’s ridiculous, because you-you’re-” His lips twitched silently a moment, hand hovering out toward John as he blinked at his chest. “You’re perfect,” he said finally, arm wilting as his face twisted in pain. “Just perfect, and you know me, you know me, and you still—” He sighed, twisting in a short pace as he combed a hand through his damp curls. “You never delete my shows,” he said, shaking his head lightly, his eyes swimming as he turned to John. “You hate them, and you never delete them. You delete your stuff to make room for them,” he added with a strangled laugh. “And, when Mrs. Hudson makes cheesecake, you always start from the side of the slice because you know I think the tip is the best part. You cancelled on that cheerleader to help me revise for my organic chemistry final, and don’t tell me she had the flu again, because I know she didn’t; I saw her at the student center the next day! You buy my biscuits instead of your tea when money’s tight, you set alarms to wish me luck before exams, you still play Cluedo even though I’ve entirely changed the rules, you—you—” He broke off, hand flopping out toward John, a broken twist of a smile on his face. “You asked your mother for a chemistry set for Christmas so you could turn around and give it to me for my birthday,” he said, like it was almost something to be laughed at, but there was nothing humorous in his eyes, glittering between blinks as he shook his head. “How—How could I not fall in love with you?” he creaked, arms falling back to his sides with a listless shrug. “How could I—”

John didn’t think, didn’t stop to question, just felt for once in his life, and it was suddenly so clear to
him, so glaringly transparent that every reason Sherlock loved him was just an example of how much John loved him back. For the first time, John was honest with himself, and the truth was they had wasted too much time already, so he moved, lunging forward and tangling his fingers in the back of Sherlock’s curls as he pulled him roughly down.

Sherlock didn’t move much at first, hands instinctively lifting to John’s chest in a steadying gesture, but then he simply froze, lips trembling more than responding, and John knew instinctively that no one had ever done this before, that Sherlock had never let anyone else do this before, and he softened slightly, loosening his hold in Sherlock’s hair as he gently shifted his lips across the brunette’s. Sherlock sucked in a breath between their mouths, fingers gripping a little more purposefully into the fabric of John’s suit, and then, in the scantest shift of skin, he pressed back, and John actually shivered with a wash of relief.

Their lips were cold at first, water dripping between them as it trailed down their faces or dropped from their hair, but they warmed up quick enough, and John slid his hand from Sherlock’s hair, rustling water loose as he stroked his fingers down to cup around the boy’s jaw.

Sherlock trembled, but the faint hiss that puffed against John’s lips suggested it was from cold more than anything else, and John pulled away, hand sliding down to hook onto Sherlock’s neck as they hovered, breaths fanning hot between their faces.

John swallowed, his head bobbing with the motion, sending his nose grazing alongside Sherlock’s. “I love you,” he whispered, and, even as he could feel the skepticism tensing around Sherlock’s spine, the truth of it settled bright and warm in his own chest. “I do,” he assured, shifting his fingers a little firmer on Sherlock’s neck, “and don’t tell me I don’t, because I’m standing here in a Spiderman costume, soaked to the bone after setting off the fire sprinklers, and I don’t think anything but love makes someone quite that stupid.”

Sherlock chuckled, pulling his face away to blink down at where his fingers still shifted tentatively in John’s suit. “John, I—” he started, but John stopped him, lifting a hand to tangle with Sherlock’s on his chest as he stretched up to press one more brief kiss to his mouth.

He then backed away, removing his hand from Sherlock’s neck, but he kept their fingers intertwined, their arms stretched between them as he smiled up at the brunette. “Sherlock,” he said fondly, tightening his grip a little, “let’s just go home.”

Sherlock blinked at him, and then his expression softened, a faint blush creeping up beneath the arches of his cheeks as he looked down at his fingers twisted with John’s. “Yeah,” he agreed, nodding as he looked up again. “Yeah, okay.”

John smiled, and then bobbed his head toward the back of the club, towing Sherlock along until the detective came up to his side.

“John?” he asked as they walked, pushing out a back exit into an alley. “How did you know where I was? I don’t think I mentioned the name of the club.”

“No, you didn’t,” John confirmed, shaking his head. “I called Irene. She—” He paused, stopping dead in the alley, and Sherlock halted at his side, frowning curiously down at him. “She knew,” he murmured, blinking up at the detective. “Irene, I- I think she knew I liked you.”

“She did?” Sherlock inquired, tilting his head.

“Well, not at first,” John said, shrugging as they continued toward the street. “I called her, asking where the club was, and she wouldn’t tell me, said it was none of my business.”
Sherlock made a vaguely agreeable sound, and John elbowed him on the arm, prompting a smirk.

“Then... Well, I think I just sounded really pathetic,” he muttered, and Sherlock laughed. “Well, what was I supposed to think?” he bleated as Sherlock continued to cackle. “She’s going on about cologne and hair gel and Monte Carlo!”

“Yes, you’re going to have to explain that,” Sherlock said as they hit the main street, heading down the pavement toward home, and John sighed, twitching his hand within Sherlock’s self-consciously.

“I guess Victor took one of his previous boyfriends to Monte Carlo for a weekend,” John mumbled bitterly, and Sherlock frowned out at the street in front of them, humming thoughtfully. “What?” John prompted, and the brunette shrugged.

“Nothing,” he clipped. “I was just wondering if I could have convinced him to change it to Barcelona.”

John twisted up to him, hand tugging away in affront, but Sherlock only tightened his hold, turning and dipping his lips down to John’s. This time, it was John taken by surprise, and, though Sherlock was still relatively tentative, it was clear that wouldn’t be the case for long.

Sherlock pulled away, smiling softly down at John’s stunned face. “I’m kidding,” he assured, chuckling softly as John frowned at him. They continued walking, Sherlock ruefully shaking his head. “He was awful,” he said with the same tone one might use to describe their experience with food poisoning. “Just went on and on about his car. I probably would’ve pulled that sprinkler stunt myself if I’d thought of it.”

John laughed, rattling his shoulder against Sherlock’s, and then blinked, brow creasing. “Hey, what happened to him?” he asked, looking up at the detective. “Won’t he be wondering where you went?”

“Doubtful,” Sherlock scoffed, and then met John’s raised brows, sighing exasperatedly. “You honestly want me to contact the guy you committed a crime to get me away from and let him know I’m okay?”

“Yes, please,” John chirped, and Sherlock rolled his eyes, muttering to himself as he fished out his mobile. “I should text Irene too,” John added, slipping his phone from his sleeve. “If this thing even still works.”

“Mine did,” Sherlock replied absentmindedly as he tapped away at his screen, and, as John hit the unlock button, the mobile did indeed appear fully functional.

He opened up a text to Irene, waffling over the words a moment before swiping out a brief message.

*I got him*

The reply was practically instantaneous.

*Knew you had it in ya, Tiger*

“What are you smiling at?” Sherlock inquired, craning his neck to read John’s screen.

John chuckled, shaking his head as he tucked the mobile away. “Nothing, I’ll tell ya later. How’s Victor?” he inquired, bobbing a nod at Sherlock’s screen.

“What wants to know if I’m free next weekend,” Sherlock replied, raising his eyebrows with a sidelong smirk.
John stamped down his jealousy as best he could, no real point to it now, but he did move a little closer to Sherlock, their sides brushing as they walked. “Pretty sure you’re busy,” he mused airily, and Sherlock slowly started to grin.

“And the weekend after that?”

“Filled.”

“And the one after that?”

“Booked.”

“And after that?”

“Sherlock,” John said, raising an eyebrow up at the brunette’s teasing smile, “let’s just assume you’re going to be unavailable for all weekends from here on out, okay?”

Something almost startled flickered across Sherlock’s face, and then he smiled softly, swiping out something on his phone before stowing it away in his pocket. “Okay,” he agreed, reaching back to take John’s hand again, fingers tingling across his palm, “I think I can live with that.”

John looked up, stifling his beaming as best he could. “Well, good,” he replied, stroking his thumb across the back of Sherlock’s hand, “but, just so you know, whirlwind trips around Europe aren’t gonna be in the budget for a while.”

Sherlock laughed, tossing his head up at the night sky. “That’s alright,” he assured, nudging John lightly with his elbow, “so long as you still let me have the tip of the cheesecake.”

John chuckled, turning up a fond smile. “Always,” he promised, soft and all-encompassing, and Sherlock squeezed his hand a little tighter as they hastened their steps back to Baker Street.
Prompt: For Halloween Sherlock and John dress up as Castiel and Dean - anonymous

This fic is done entirely in texts and phone calls, and it's the first time I've ever attempted that, so I hope you like it!

John was only trying to return a lost notebook he found in the library, but he gets a lot more than he bargained for when the owner turns out to be one Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter Notes

It should be obvious, but, in case it isn't, here is the formatting key for everyone:
John
Sherlock
Mike
Mycroft

Also, the Supernatural references are EVERYWHERE, so, if you don't understand something, I would suggest you start there to figure it out.

---OCTOBER 14th---

3:46pm
Hey is this Sherlock? You left your notebook in the library

3:47pm
Who is this? How did you get this number? SH

3:49pm
SH? So you are Sherlock Holmes? I got the number out of your notebook

3:50pm
How did you get my notebook?

3:50pm
You left it in the library

3:51pm
No I didn’t

3:52pm
Pretty sure ya did
3:53pm
Who is this really?

3:53pm
The guy trying to return your notebook. Can you pick it up from the help desk?

3:54pm
I didn’t lose a notebook. I don’t lose things.

3:55pm
Well there’s a first time for everything. And how else would I get your number?

3:55pm
There are a variety of possible avenues, most of which are illegal. Or you could be stalking me.

3:56pm
Stalking isn’t illegal?

3:56pm
Not explicitly, but I believe there’s legislation in the works.

3:57pm
Huh. The more you know. But I’m not stalking you, I just found your notebook.

3:58pm
It’s not mine

3:58pm
So you keep saying but it says Sherlock Holmes on the inside cover and that’s not exactly a popular name. Will you just check?

3:59pm
I told you, it isn’t mine.

4:00pm
Humor me

4:03pm
You can leave it at the help desk.

4:05pm
So you DID lose a notebook

4:06pm
It fell out of my bag.

4:07pm
I found it on the table

4:08pm
It fell out of my bag onto the table

4:09pm
Whatever you say Sherlock. Help desk is open til 7
Ok

This is usually the part where people say thank you

Thank you

You’re welcome

What do you mean my name isn’t popular?

It’s not UNpopular, it’s just not common

What’s wrong with an uncommon name?

Nothing. I didn’t mean there was anything wrong with it

Then why did you say it wasn’t popular?

I no longer have any idea

What sort of name should I have? Bob? Mark? John?

Your name is one of those isn’t it?

Maybe

Which one?

Now who’s the stalker?

You text me, remember?

Yeah, but you keep texting back

Sherlock?
I didn’t mean you had to stop

---OCTOBER 15th---

11:37am
Did you get your notebook?

11:44am
You went through it

11:52am
I was trying to find a number

11:54am
The number was on the inside cover. You went through the whole thing.

11:57am
Not the whole thing

12:01pm
Most of it

12:03pm
Okay fine I looked a bit. Since you brought it up do I have to change my locks?

12:05pm
What?

12:06pm
All that stuff about lethal poisons and drawings of blood spatter. You’re not some sort of axe murderer are you?

12:19pm
Sherlock?

12:22pm
I’m not an axe murderer

12:23pm
Chainsaw?

12:41pm
Sherlock?

12:53pm
It was just a joke

1:09pm
I know you’re not a murderer

1:10pm
How?

1:13pm
I dunno. You just don’t seem the type
And you're basing this assumption on my name and a notebook full of crime scene diagrams?

Yep!

Do you leave your car doors unlocked too?

Only when the nice homeless man and his dog are outside to watch it

Smart

I try

So why do you have crime scene diagrams?

Is there any answer that won’t make me sound like a psychopath?

You could try the truth

I consult with Scotland Yard sometimes on cases. Predominantly murders, thus the blood spatter analysis.

You’re having me on

I assure you, I’m not

So you’re a cop?

God no. I’m just a consultant. They don’t pay me or anything.

So what are you like 30?

30 what?

Years old.

No. Do I sound 30?
No you sound about my age

Which is?

You first Mr. Scotland Yard Consultant

I’m 19

Then I’m 20

Then? Would your age have differed if I wasn’t 19?

Don’t get smart with me

Wouldn’t dream of it

You’re really a consultant with Scotland Yard? And 19?

Does asking twice make me less likely to lie?

In a perfect world

Yes and yes

So you go to Bart’s then?

No

But I found your notebook in the library

Anyone can walk into a library

Fair enough. So where do you go to school? If you go to school

You do realize you could just search my name and find all of this information. As you’ve expressed, Sherlock Holmes is hardly a common name.
2:17pm
That would be cheating

2:18pm
Cheating how?

2:18pm
I have to get to know you the old fashioned way

2:19pm
Carrying on a text conversation with a total stranger?

2:20pm
Ah the good ole days

2:21pm
You are quite the traditionalist indeed

2:21pm
A dying breed, we are

2:22pm
The burden that must rest on your shoulders

2:23pm
It’s a tough job, but someone’s gotta do it

2:24pm
Your sacrifice is duly noted

2:24pm
Good

2:25pm
It’s John by the way

2:26pm
What is?

2:27pm
I is. John Watson.

2:28pm
Oh

2:28pm
Yeah.

2:33pm
Do I say hello again or something?

2:34pm
You never really said hello to start with

2:35pm
True enough

2:35pm
Hello John Watson

2:36pm
Hello Sherlock Holmes. How fortuitous it is to make your virtual acquaintance

2:37pm
Do you always do Regency Era introductions?

2:37pm
It is a truth universally acknowledged

2:38pm
Did you have to look that up?

2:38pm
No

2:39pm
Liar

2:40pm
My mum and sister have literature degrees, I know how Pride and Prejudice starts

2:41pm
My mistake. You’re not going the literature route I gather?

2:41pm
No, medicine. You?

2:42pm
Chemistry

2:43pm
But not at Bart’s

2:43pm
No

2:44pm
That all I get?

2:45pm
For now, John. For now.

---OCTOBER 20th---

1:22pm
Who are you texting?

1:23pm
You
I meant before that. You’ve been smiling to yourself all class

I have not

You just did!

Shouldn’t you be paying attention? Where are you anyway?

Back row, I came in late. And you first

Fine I’m putting it away

I saw that

Shut up

---OCTOBER 22nd---

Lobes?

Frontal, parietal, temporal and occipital

Components of the parietal lobe

Sensory cortex and motor cortex

Which are responsible for…?

Sensory cortex receives information from the spinal cord regarding position and motion of body parts, as well as relaying information from the sense of touch. Motor cortex helps the brain monitor and control movement throughout the body

See, you’re fine

One more time?

We’ve been at this for two hours. I have a life too ya know
Really?

Shut up

You should take a break though

Maybe even sleep

What is this “sleep” of which you speak?

I’m serious, John. It won’t matter how much you study if you’re not well-rested

Thanks mum

You caught me. I’ve been your mother this whole time. Have you been eating your vegetables?

Oh god don’t say that

You have something against vegetables?

No that bit about my mum

You have something against your mother?

No I’d just rather not associate you with my mother

Why not?

It’s just weird

Why?

Because you’re my friend.

Or something
Or something?

10:09pm
Or something

10:14pm
I think I’d rather be your something than your friend

10:17pm
I do believe you’re flirting with me Sherlock Holmes

10:19pm
And I believe we’re back in the Regency Era

10:21pm
Nervous response, my apologies

10:23pm
Are you saying I make you nervous?

10:27pm
Would it be okay if I was?

10:32pm
I suppose

10:34pm
You suppose?

10:37pm
It would be okay

10:40pm
Well good

10:41pm
Good

10:45pm
You should go to sleep

10:46pm
You’re not going to sleep

10:47pm
You don’t know that

10:49pm
I get random questions from you at like 3am almost every night. You never sleep

10:50pm
Well that’s biologically impossible

10:50pm
And they’re not random
10:51pm
You asked me what planet came after Venus

10:52pm
I needed to know for a case

10:53pm
It’s EARTH Sherlock!

10:54pm
Which is really the most reasonable one to forget, if you think about it.

10:56pm
You are by far the strangest person I have ever known

10:58pm
You don’t really know me

11:00pm
I think I’m getting there

11:04pm
I should sleep though

11:05pm
Probably

11:06pm
Yeah. Talk to you tmrw?

11:07pm
Don’t you always?

11:09pm
Goodnight Sherlock

11:10pm
Goodnight John

11:27pm
What planet comes after Earth?

11:28pm
Go to sleep

11:28pm
Idiot

---OCTOBER 24th---

INCOMING CALL – NUMBER BLOCKED

“Hello?”

“John Watson?”
“Um…yes?”

“This is Mycroft Holmes.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I think you have- Wait, Holmes?”

“I understand you’ve been communicating with my brother Sherlock for the past several weeks.”

“I- Well, it’s really only been about two.”

“The exact amount of time is irrelevant. I am calling to ascertain your motives.”

“…I’m sorry, what?”

“Your motives, Mr. Watson. For what purpose are you pursuing a relationship with my brother?”

“Woah, pursuing a-!”

“I don’t mean it literally, Mr. Watson, I merely mean to inquire as to the precise nature of your motivations.”

“…What, did you swallow a thesaurus?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yeah, you do! I don’t have any motive, alright? Sherlock is my friend.”

“You’ve never even met him.”

“Yeah, well I’ve never met you either, but I’m developing some pretty clear perceptions.”

“…I see.”

“Good.”

“So you intend to continue your association with my brother.”

“Yes.”

“You are aware of his…proclivities, are you not?”

“What, you mean the murder thing?”

“…”

“Yeah, I know, and I think it’s pretty fucking amazing, so are we done here?”

“…It would appear so.”

“Great. Enjoy your weekend.”

“And you as well, Mr. Watson. You as well.”

CALL ENDED

OUTGOING CALL – SHERLOCK HOLMES
“Hello?”

“…”

“John?”

“Yeah, I- Sorry, that’s just…not what I expected your voice to sound like.”

“Oh? How do you mean?”

“Nothing, it’s just…deeper than I thought it’d be.”

“Deeper?”

“Stop changing the subject.”

“I don’t even know what the subject is.”

“Your brother just called me.”

“Mycroft?”

“Yes. Why, do you have another brother?”

“Yes. Well, no, he- Never mind, why did Mycroft call you?”

“According to him? To ‘ascertain my motives’.”

“Oh, for the love- MYCROFT!”

“Wait, he’s there with you?”

“I don’t have Friday classes, remember? I’m already home for half-term. MYCROFT!? Hang on a sec.”

“Kay”

“What the hell do you think you’re- … It’s none of your- … I’m pretty sure she didn’t mean you should take over my entire LIFE! … It’s not like that! … Yes, of course I remember, but John isn’t Seb, and- … Oh, go stick your nose in the rest of your cheesecake or something, and keep it OUT of my BUSINESS! …Sorry ‘bout that.”

“Bloody hell.”

“What?”

“There have been civil wars less brutal than that!”

“We have a rather…tumultuous relationship.”

“No kidding.”

“…”

“…Hey, Sherlock?”

“Hmm?”
“Can I ask you something?”

“You mean in addition to the question you just asked?”

“See, now I’m thinking about my primary school teacher, Mrs. Fletcher, and this is just weird.”

“Sorry, what did you wanna ask?”

“Who- And you don’t have to answer, if you don’t want to.”

“Noted.”

“Okay, who- Who’s Seb?”

“…”

“Sherlock?”

“He- No one, he’s- Just someone from secondary school.”

“A friend?”

“Not in the end.”

“Oh… So, it’s a good thing I’m not like him?”

“Yeah. A very good thing.”

“Okay. Good, that’s- That’s good.”

“Mhmm.”

“…”

“…”

“So, got any plans for half-term?”

“Not really. You?”

“Naw. Netflix just added season 9 of Supernatural, though, so I thought I might marathon that.”

“Supernatural?”

“It’s this American TV show. You’ve really never heard of it?”

“No. What’s it about?”

“It’s- Well, it’s kind of difficult to explain, but it’s great; you should definitely watch it.”

“Well, now that they’ve added season 9 to Netflix.”

“Exactly! We-We could watch it together. If you want.”

“Together?”

“Like this, I mean. Not like together together, but- Well, we have all week. We could work our way
“You want to marathon 9 seasons in a week?”

“What, you afraid you can’t keep up?”

“No, just afraid I’ll die of sleep deprivation.”

“But you never sleep! You’ve been training for this your whole life! Time to shine, Holmes!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll try.”

“Great! Let me just grab my computer.”

“What, now?”

“Did you not hear me? We have 9 seasons to get through! There’s not a moment to waste!”

“This had better be the best damn show-”

“It is. But, even if it’s not, the company can’t be beat.”

“No. No, I suppose it can’t.”

---OCTOBER 27th---

3:12pm
Hey

3:14pm
Hey I thought you had a lunch thing?

3:15pm
Got done early what’s up?

3:17pm
Nothing much. Grabbing a shower before the marathon starts again.

3:18pm
There’s a visual I didn’t need in public

3:21pm
Just trying to keep the romance alive. So you’re still in public?

3:22pm
Yea why?

3:23pm
No reason.

3:23pm
But out of curiosity can anyone see your screen right now?

3:25pm
No but don’t get too carried away. I’d like to be able to stand up soon
Well enjoy it while you can because you won’t be walking much later

You wouldn’t be doing it right if I could

Okay who is this?

What?

Sherlock never misses apostrophes, always puts an h on his yeah, would have corrected my your/you’re mix-up, and wouldn’t be caught dead saying ‘what’s up’. So who is this?

I knew he wasn’t the sexting type

You’re pretty good at it though for the record

Cheers. Now who are you?

Irene Adler. I’m a friend of Sherlock’s

Awfully sticky fingers for a friend

Well I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t vet the new boyfriend

I’m not his boyfriend

The past two weeks of blushing I’ve endured say otherwise

Where is Sherlock while you’re impersonating him?


A little light grocery shopping with your thievery?

You know I think I like you

And I think I’m flattered
3:49pm
You ought to be. Oh here he comes

3:53pm
I AM SO SORRY!!!!!

3:54pm
Sherlock only ever uses one exclamation point

3:55pm
Oh get a room!!

3:55pm
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

---OCTOBER 28th---

10:47pm
I can’t go on

10:48pm
You have to! This is the season 4 premiere!

10:49pm
Perfect place to stop. Start with a fresh season tomorrow.

10:50pm
No we have to get to the gay angel!

10:52pm
The what?

10:53pm
Castiel? Cas? Destiel?

10:55pm
?

10:56pm
Do you even have the internet?

10:57pm
Will you just explain it to me

10:58pm
You’re cranky without sleep you know that?

10:59pm
Most people are

11:01pm
Castiel is the name of the angel

11:03pm
And he’s gay?
11:05pm
Only to people with eyes

11:07pm
Okay. So who’s Destiel?

11:09pm
Destiel is the ship name for Dean and Castiel

11:10pm
Ship name?

11:13pm
Oh god.

11:14pm
What?

11:15pm
So young. So innocent.

11:16pm
It was just a question

11:18pm
Like a little baby bird freshly hatched in its nest

11:19pm
I’m just gonna look it up myself

11:21pm
So ignorant of the trials and smut of this world!

11:22pm
Smut?

11:25pm
Yeah no that one you’re definitely looking up on your own

11:26pm
Okay

11:29pm
What’s archiveofourown?

11:37pm
WHAT THE FUCK

11:39pm
What did you find?

11:41pm
WHY DIDN’T YOU WARN ME!?

11:43pm
Object lesson. So what was it?

11:46pm
Best forgotten

11:46pm
Tentacles?

11:48pm
WHAT!?

11:50pm
You should check out the fanart

11:50pm
Wealth of anatomical knowledge

11:52pm
Why do you hate me?

11:54pm
I’m educating. OKAY OKAY HERE IT IS are you watching?

11:55pm
I’ve been doing little else for the past four days.

11:56pm
So ungrateful. Look at those sparks fly!

11:59pm
You know, some criminal psychologists speculate that stabbing is symbolic of penetration

12:01am
Yeah it is!

12:03am
You can be such a child sometimes

12:05am
Oh the eye-fucking. All of the eye-fucking.

12:07am
Alright this subtext is admittedly rather blatant

12:09am
Welcome to the cult my friend!

12:10am
Shipping people, feeling things, the fandom business.

12:11am
I understood that reference

12:12am
I understood THAT reference
12:13am
What reference?

12:14am
You weren’t doing Steve Rogers?

12:15am
No

12:16am
Should I be?

12:18am
I’m extremely torn on how to answer that question so I’m just gonna move on

12:19am
What are you doing for Halloween?

12:21am
That’s Friday right?

12:22am
Yep

12:23am
Nothing. Why?

12:25am
A friend of mine’s having a party. I thought you might wanna come.

12:29am
Sherlock?

12:31am
You mean meet you?

12:33am
Well I suppose we could ignore one another all night. Not like I know what you look like anyway.

12:34am
But yeah I kinda figured we could meet

12:38am
If you want to

12:40am
But you don’t have to

12:41am
I’m not trying to pressure you or anything

12:41am
I’m fine just talking to you

12:44am
Any time you wanna jump in here go right ahead

12:45am
How would you know it was me?

12:46am
What?

12:48am
At the party. How would you know it was me?

12:50am
We’ll plan costumes or something. That way we’ll be able to pick each other out

12:53am
You’ve had this planned for a while

12:55am
Maybe

12:56am
Why?

12:58am
Why did I have it planned?

12:59am
No why do you want to meet me?

1:03am
I thought it was obvious

1:05am
Apparently not

1:09am
Because I like you. And I don’t want it to be just virtual anymore

1:12am
Sherlock?

1:15am
Did I freak you out?

1:17am
I’m sorry just forget I said anything

1:18am
We don’t have to meet

1:22am
Sherlock?

1:23am
What costumes?
What?

What costumes should we wear?

Are you sure you wanna do this?

Because we don’t have to

I’m really fine with keeping things as they are

John, what costumes? I know you have an idea.

It’s kinda stupid

We’ll see

I was thinking maybe…Cas and Dean?

You as Cas and me as Dean

Don’t know why, you just seem more the angel type

I have no idea what I meant by that sorry

It was a dumb idea, we can do something else

It’s not dumb

It’s not?

No, it’s not. And your casting is correct, I look much more like Cas than Dean.

Of course you do

?
Nothing. I’ll send you the address. I should be there around 9:30.

1:48am
I’ll be the one in the trench coat

1:49am
And I’ll be the one with the leather jacket and Daddy issues

1:50am
Okay

1:51am
Okay

1:58am
Can I go to sleep now?

1:59am
Oh sorry yeah

2:00am
Don’t apologize. It’s not like it wasn’t worth staying awake.

2:02am
I’m glad

2:03am
Goodnight Sherlock

2:04am
Goodnight John

---OCTOBER 31st---

OUTGOING CALL – SHERLOCK HOLMES

“Hello?”

“Hey! Where are you?”

“What?”

“Where are you!”

“Hang on … God it's loud in there! What were you saying?”

“I was asking where you were.”

“At the moment? Hiding.”

“Can I get a slightly more specific geographic location?”

“On the back porch. Careful going through the living room, though; I think they’re attempting to do keg stands.”

“Attempting?”
“Well, it looks more like a failure of natural selection than anything else.”

“Roger that. Avoiding the living room. How long have you been here?”

“Ten minutes, maybe less. Ran into someone from secondary school—always a plus to an evening—but, thankfully, she got distracted by some song that came on—something by that woman, the crazy one with the meat suit? Lady something-or-other. RaRa? It’s something like that. … John?”

“Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn around.”

“…Hi.”

“Hi.”

“…I’m gonna hang up now.”

“Right.”
“Bet you can’t levitate that rock!”

“You’re on!”

“Nobody’s levitating anything!” John broke in, jogging a little to stand between the two women, eyes narrowed as they flicked between them.

Irene rolled her eyes, Mary sighing exasperatedly.

“Honestly, John,” Irene snapped, “we’re not that drunk.”

John lifted an eyebrow pointedly at the butterbeer swinging between her pale fingers.

Irene followed his eyes, and then shrugged, turning and continuing to stumble her way along the pebbled beach. “Well, at least I have a good excuse,” she drawled, nearly toppling over a piece of driftwood. “We lost. I’m distraught!”

“Didn’t stop you from coming to our victory party,” John mumbled, and Irene turned to stick her tongue out at him. “How did you get in anyway?”

“The Fat Lady has a crush on me.”

“Bullshit,” Mary snapped, blue eyes glinting in the moonlight as she glared, “you just give her all the good gossip.”

“That too,” Irene called airily over her shoulder. “Or maybe she just knows how much I care for my dear, dear little Gryffindors, and lets me in out of the kindness of her fat heart.”

Mary scoffed, and John snorted, but an affronted voice behind them spoke.

“You never visit me,” Sherlock bit, and John paused, waiting for the brunette to catch up.

“Well, of course not,” Irene spluttered, rattling her head. “Riddles are hard!”

“John can solve them,” Sherlock said, waving a hand in gesture as they started walking again. “He visits all the time.”
“Oh, *does* he?” Irene crooned, and John was grateful for the moonlight to hide his blush as she turned, walking backward as she crooked a brow. “And he doesn’t climb up the tower to your window?”

“Only when he can’t solve the riddle.”

“Sherlock!”

“What?”

Irene cackled, leaning on Mary for support, the blonde also dissolved into giggles.

John glared at them, jaw tight and face burning. “I fly!” he snapped, but they only laughed harder. He rolled his eyes, Sherlock looking down at him sheepishly.

“Not good?” he murmured, and, in spite of the laughter still drifting back from in front of them, John had to smile, shaking his head as he chuckled to the ground.

“Hey!” Irene suddenly blurted, spinning on the pebbles, her body wobbling a bit before the only-slightly-steadier Mary grabbed her arm for a support. “You know what we should do?”

“Go back inside?” John and Sherlock said in tandem, sharing a smile, but Irene just rolled her eyes.

“No,” she drawled, and then grinned, bright and worrisomely mischievously. “We should go skinny-dipping!”

John blinked, Sherlock growing still beside him. “What?” he muttered, but Irene was already off, running across the beach, Mary being dragged along by the wrist.

“Come on!” she cajoled, and John’s mouth dropped open.

“Irene!” he spluttered, Sherlock growing still beside him. “What?” he muttered, but Irene was already off, running across the beach, Mary being dragged along by the wrist.

“Irene!” he spluttered, but the woman didn’t turn, and, after a moment, John ran after them, worried for their safety if nothing else. “Irene, come back! We can’t go skinny-dipping; it’s October!”

“So drink some Firewhiskey after!” she called, finally coming to a stop near the water.

“Oh god,” John muttered as Irene began tugging at the base of her jumper, ripping it up to expose a bra he only saw enough of to know it was red. “Mary, stop her!” he shouted, eyes averted to where Sherlock came up to his side.

“I don’t think Mary’s going to be much help,” he said, face half twisted into a grimace as he looked out ahead, and John, reluctantly, followed his gaze.

Mary’s shoes were already off, her zipper undone as she began shuffling out of her jeans.

“I don’t think Mary’s going to be much help,” he said, face half twisted into a grimace as he looked out ahead, and John, reluctantly, followed his gaze.

Mary’s shoes were already off, her zipper undone as she began shuffling out of her jeans.

“Mary!” John bleated, but the girl just shrugged.

“What?” she asked, pulling her trousers free, and John looked up at the stars as she moved to the hem of her hoodie. “I’ve never gone skinny-dipping in this lake before.”

“This lake?” John asked, changing a fleeting glance down just as Mary unhooked her bra, Irene now entirely naked behind her. “Bloody hell,” John breathed, spinning around completely, hands planted on his hips as he closed his eyes to the ground, Sherlock laughing at his misfortune.

“What?” he asked, nudging John on the arm. “It’s not like you haven’t seen Irene naked before.”
“That was different,” John hissed back. “She was streaking after a game, and she was very far away!”

Sherlock laughed, and then, a moment later, loud splashing and laughter could be heard, and John tentatively turned back to find both women safely in the water, their clothes littered across the beach.

“Guys, seriously,” John pleaded, moving to stand within the cotton detritus. “Get out! Or you’ll both be spending the night in the hospital wing.”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you over all the BAWK BAWK BAWK!” Irene mocked, flapping her arms against the surface of the water, Mary laughing raucously at her side.

John glared, crossing his arms. “I’m not *chicken*,” he snapped, Irene’s mouth moving to silently mimic the words, “I just don’t wanna listen to you two *whine* when you catch a cold.”

“We promise we won’t whine,” Irene said, Mary turning back to place a hand over her heart in oath. “Now, come on! It’s not as cold as you’d think.”

“I am *not* going in there,” John insisted, and Irene pouted.

“But you’re all muddy from Quidditch,” she crooned, and John looked down, the uniform he was still wearing indeed splattered with dirt, and he was sure half the pitch was still in his hair.

“I’ll shower,” he countered, lifting his chin again. “Like a normal person,” he added with a tip of his head, and Irene sneered at him while Mary booed.

“How ‘bout you, Sherlock?” Irene proposed, eyes turning toward the brunette. “Care for some dippin’-skinny?”

“I-”

“Please!” John scoffed, interrupting Sherlock’s reply. “Sherlock’s even less likely to do it than *I* am!”

“Why?”

John blinked, hesitantly turning to look up at the Ravenclaw.

Sherlock was frowning down at him, seemingly undecided if he was going to be angry or not. “Why am I less likely to do it?”

John’s mouth moved soundlessly a moment, grey eyes only narrowing as he floundered. “Because you-you just don’t do that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?” Sherlock snapped back, and John slid a small distance back across the stones.

“You know,” he mumbled, waving a hand toward the moonlit water, “silly stuff. Impulsive, spontaneous sorts of things.”

“You don’t think I’m spontaneous?”

“No, I- That’s not what I meant,” John urged, stretching a hand out between them, but Sherlock moved away.

“I can be spontaneous,” he barked, eyes flashing.

John sighed, frustrated at himself more than anything. “I *know* you can; I was just saying.”
“That you don’t think I’m spontaneous.”

“I never said that!” John blurted, and Sherlock blinked at him, eyes wide. “You’re plenty spontaneous, just not—not skinny-dipping spontaneous. You’re spontaneous in other ways, like—What are you doing?”

Sherlock shrugged out of his coat, tossing it aside before latching onto the bottom of his sweatshirt—a Chudley Cannons hoodie of John’s he had adopted years ago. “What does it look like?” he snapped, face disappearing a moment as he pulled the fabric over his head, his hair frizzed with static when he reemerged. “I’m going skinny-dipping.”

John’s mouth dropped open, his brain short-circuiting a moment as a flood of things he couldn’t afford to think about right now rushed in before he could dam them. “You—No,” he stammered, shaking his head. “Sherlock, don’t. It’s freezing in there!”

“Irene said it wasn’t that bad,” Sherlock replied, pulling on the hem of his t-shirt now.

“Irene lies!”

“It’s true, I do!” Irene added, waving at them from the water. “But not about this. It’s really not bad.”

“It’s really not,” Mary agreed, nodding, and John gaped between them in betrayal.

“Sherlock, you don’t—” he started, turning back, and then all his oxygen left him in a shaky pant, vision swimming as he tried to focus.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t seen Sherlock without his shirt on before—hell, he’d seen him entirely naked before on a couple of accidental occasions—but it was different now somehow, caught under the moon in the autumn chill.

Sherlock’s skin shone in the silver light, a flawless expanse of lean muscle and pale skin that faded into a dusty trail of dark hair as he peeled apart his zipper with long delicate fingers, and John had to look away before he did something ridiculous—like whimper or drop to his knees.

Irene catcalled from the water, Mary’s encouraging whistling enunciating the sound, and Sherlock eventually disappeared from his side, John finally able to breathe again as splashing could be heard to his left.

Slowly, he turned, the ripples from the laughing trio rolling out in silver-tipped rings as they bobbed in the water.

“You’re up, Captain!” Mary beckoned, and Irene lifted her hands to her mouth as she howled.

John only looked at Sherlock though, his pale face and puff of dark curls the only parts of him visible.

Sherlock held his eyes a moment, the water lapping at his chin, and then, slowly, he smirked, flicking his eyebrows in taunt.

John shook his head, frustration building to determination in the set of his shoulders. With a huff of a sigh, he dropped his face, twisting at the ties of his Quidditch uniform to raucous applause. He blocked out most of the noise, turning a bit to avoid certain indiscretions, and then darted into the water.

“Fucking hell!” he cried, the cold slicing into him like knives, knocking him breathless.
“You get used to it,” Sherlock chuckled, smirking as John swam up to his side.

“You reckon the merpeople are awake?” Mary mused, and John spun his head toward her, expression incredulous.

“Really!?” he spouted as Sherlock laughed. “You’re bringing that up now!?”

Mary shrugged. “I just thought of it now,” she offered, and John shook his head in disbelief.

“Well, if they are,” Irene said, spinning around and beginning to swim further out into the dark water, “they’re getting quite a show.” She glanced over her shoulder, eyes roving down, and, though John knew she couldn’t see anything through the water, his body still flushed with humiliated heat. Irene laughed, facing forward again as she sucked in a breath and disappeared below the surface.

“Hey, wait up!” Mary called as the girl resurfaced, taking off after her at a breaststroke.

John hovered, kicking his feet as he shook his head out after the girls, and then spluttered violently, a wall of water sweeping across his face. Blinking, he scrubbed his hands over his eyes, glaring across at the smirking man beside him, whose expression faltered as John quirked a brow.

Suddenly, he spun, swimming quickly away, but John splashed right after him, quickly coming up to his heels.

He latched onto Sherlock’s ankle, the boy letting out a small yelp as John pulled him back, and then quickly planted his hands on Sherlock’s back, pushing him hard beneath the surface of the water. Laughing, he then waded a small distance away, watching as Sherlock came spitting back up, hair flattened down over his forehead. “What have we learned?” John taunted, smirking across at the boy.

Sherlock glared, brushing his hair back from the pale skin. “You’re over-competitive?”

John chuckled, shaking his head down at the water, and then startled, heart leaping into his throat as Sherlock let out a shout. “What!?” John exclaimed, sweeping toward him, but Sherlock only flailed away, limbs kicking wildly.

“It- There’s something on my ankle!”

“What?”

“SOMETHING’S GOT MY ANKLE!”

“Okay, okay!” John soothed, holding his hands aloft as Sherlock panicked. “Let me just-”

“GET IT OFF!”

John didn’t wait any longer, ducking below the surface and trying to see through the dark. It was nearly impossible, the moon barely penetrating the water, but Sherlock’s kicking had brought his leg near enough to the surface for John to approximate where his ankle would end up, and he reached down. He brushed against Sherlock’s shin first, the boy viciously kicking out at him, and John grabbed him a little more firmly, squeezing to let him know it was his hand. He then slid down to the ankle, his fingers brushing something smooth and slimy, and he recoiled a moment before realizing what it was. Blindly, he unhooked Sherlock’s ankle, already smirking as he broke the surface of the water, culprit in hand.

“What is it?” Sherlock asked, eyes wide with terror, but they narrowed with suspicion as John started...
to laugh.

Wordlessly, he lifted his hand, seaweed stringing down from his palm, and Sherlock’s jaw clapped shut, eyes fixed on the strand of kelp. “You’re lucky to be alive!” he teased, and Sherlock’s blush was obvious even in the relative dark.

“It’s not funny!” he snapped, but John only laughed harder. “There is a squid in here, you know! And grindylows!”

“And seaweed,” John added, and Sherlock’s eyes flashed. “You sure you’re alright? Don’t need to go see Mrs. Hudson? You’ve had quite a shock.”

“I’ll show you a shock,” Sherlock muttered, thrusting his hand forward through the water, and John laughed, turning his head away from the splash as he reached out to catch Sherlock’s wrist.

He tugged inadvertently, Sherlock rippling through the water toward him, and then, quite suddenly, everything stopped.

The water lapped against their chests with soft clicks, John’s hand still looped around Sherlock’s wrist in-between them. Water was trailing down Sherlock’s face, catching the moon as it gathered in his Cupid’s bow, and John’s eyes were inevitably drawn there, transfixed as Sherlock’s lips quivered around a soft breath. Something rolled in John’s stomach, lightning racing up and down his spine, and he fluttered his gaze up, catching Sherlock’s eyes.

The grey orbs blinked at him, wide and stunned, and then, as if he could hear the question in John’s head—though he repeatedly denied any skill at Legilimency—his eyes softened, chandeliered droplets sparkling on his lashes as they stuttered in a blink.

John didn’t need any more confirmation, stretching his neck out and tipping his chin as he brought his lips to Sherlock’s, the small sigh of air that slipped from the brunette’s mouth just before they touched ringing with relief, and John almost hoped Sherlock could read minds just so he would know John felt the same way.

Neither of them had had enough to drink to write this off, to laugh about it and then go back to pretending they were only friends, and, as John now allowed himself to see, they had been nothing but pretending for a very long time, because this...

John had kissed his fair share of people. He was 17, had never been very good at the long-term thing, and—he would admit it—was a notorious flirt. Sure, it didn’t always go anywhere, but half-sober tonsil hockey in a booth at The Three Broomsticks wasn’t exactly unheard of for him, so, yeah John Watson knew his way around a kiss.

And this was something else.

It wasn’t that he’d been thinking about kissing Sherlock ever since he’d seen someone else do it, flying by Ravenclaw Tower at precisely the worst moment—finding out Sherlock was gay and that Seb Wilkes was a dick at the same time, the interaction going from kissing to the Slytherin nearly being thrown out the window within the span of fifteen seconds. It wasn’t that—by unspoken and undisputed agreement—they hadn’t dated anyone since then, John bringing up the accidental eavesdropping and initiating the awkward exchange of sexual orientations: Sherlock’s gay for John’s bi. It wasn’t that Sherlock had been sitting a little closer, touching a little more, adjusting the knot of John’s tie when John was pretty sure it had been fine to begin with. All of those things were true, of course, but that wasn’t why this kiss was different, why it felt like his very first one again, John’s heart racing and hands shaking as fingers trembled into Sherlock’s hair.
It was because it was Sherlock. Because, in some way, it had always been Sherlock. Because there are some moments that just hit you, resonate through you in a way you don’t ever fully understand at the time, but you know something is different, something has been indelibly altered, and your life will never again be entirely the same. And running into Sherlock Holmes behind his favorite tapestry—John hiding from a particularly determined ex and Sherlock avoiding detention—had been one such moment, the whole world stopping for just a second as he’d giggled in the dark with a pale boy with high cheekbones, his heart skittering even then as they’d listened to Sherlock’s professor hollering for him down the corridor. It had been a long time coming, something inevitable they always seemed to figure there’d be a better time for, but they’d pulled the trigger now, and there was no going back. There never really had been.

They broke apart with a soft click, John pulling away as his foot hit Sherlock’s beneath the water, hand coming untangled from the dark hair as he drifted back to give their limbs the necessary space.

Sherlock just stared at him, face slack and eyes blinking dazedly, and John didn’t know how he was managing to keep his legs moving, he looked so lost. He let out a ragged breath, finally looking away out across the water, and then swallowed, staring down at the waves. “Wow,” he panted, and John twitched a shy smile down to his chest.

“Yeah,” he muttered back, peering up through his lashes, “wow.”

“I-I didn’t think you-” Sherlock murmured, shaking his head, and then his eyes moved back to John’s, confusion swimming within the grey.

“What?” John pressed, tilting his head as he frowned, and Sherlock ducked his head. “What?” he urged, paddling a bit closer. “You didn’t think I…liked you?”

Sherlock’s expression pinched in a small flinch, his teeth slipping out to bite at his lower lip.

John’s mouth dropped, eyes bulging. “You’re kidding, right?” he asked, stunned, but, after a moment, Sherlock shook his head.

“I-I mean, I thought you did at first, but…but then you didn’t say anything, and-”

“I was working up to it,” John muttered ashamedly, staring down at the water.

“For four years?”

“Yes,” John sputtered back, and Sherlock lifted a speculative brow. “Well, I- It was important,” he said, and, as he chanced a glance up at the brunette, he found Sherlock’s eyes watching him curiously. “This-This is important. To me, I-I think it’s important. And I didn’t want to-to rush anything.”

Sherlock didn’t reply, didn’t move, just continued watching him, eerily conscious yet again that John had more to say.

“And- Well, I was afraid,” he murmured, shrugging, and Sherlock blinked in surprise. “I-I wasn’t sure you liked me either.”

“I did.”

John snapped his head up, somehow still shocked even though it should have been obvious, and Sherlock smiled softly, cheeks darkening in the weak light. “You-You did?” he asked, and Sherlock nodded, eyes averted. John’s heart was shaking his entire body, but there was one last thing to do, one last loose end to tie. “Do you still?” he forced out, quick and breathless before he lost his resolve,
and Sherlock snapped his head up, expression furrowed.

“Of course,” he said, rattling his head like John was being especially stupid on purpose, but John couldn’t even be offended, too distracted by replaying Sherlock’s words in his head. “How can you even ask me that? We just had that entire conversation, and you’re still not sure-”

“Okay, okay,” John chuckled, suddenly at ease, Sherlock still being Sherlock somehow making the whole thing infinitely less intimidating. “You fancy me, I get it.”

Sherlock scoffed, but he was smiling a little as he turned away, shaking his head out over the lake.

John twisted his neck, following the man’s gaze, and found Mary and Irene off to his left, water spraying up all around them as they splashed, their laughter echoing back. John watched them, smiling to himself a moment, and then reality came rushing in, a sudden recollection of how they’d ended up in this position in the first place, as well as a flush of embarrassed awareness of how entirely exposed everything was at the moment.

“Um,” he murmured, sweeping his arms to propel himself backward a short distance, “maybe we should- Er-”

“Continue this conversation clothed?” Sherlock surmised, turning to him with a small smirk.

John swallowed, Sherlock tracing the lump down his throat before quirking a brow at him. “Yes,” John croaked, and Sherlock laughed.

“Okay,” he agreed, nodding as he swam up beside him. “Probably for the best. Race ya back?” he asked, eyes glinting over a teasing smile, and it was so easy to grin back.

“Haven’t learned your lesson after all, have you?” he goaded, and Sherlock chuckled.

“Guess not. So?”

John shrugged. “Hey, if you wanna lose, that’s your business.”

Sherlock smiled, and then turned back toward shore. “Okay, ready”—they levelled their shoulders—“set-“

A hand came up to John’s neck, tugging him sideways, and he barely had time to gasp in alarm before Sherlock’s mouth was on his, warm and earnest and dizzying. The brunette pulled away just as quickly, John panting against his mouth as it grazed against his own.

“Go,” Sherlock brushed against his lips, and then he was gone, shocking a cry out of John as cold water from his dive splashed up over his face.

“Hey!” John shouted as soon as Sherlock resurfaced and his tongue remembered how to work. “That’s cheating!”

Sherlock’s laugh rolled back across the silver-painted water, his pale arms cutting through the dark silhouettes of the forest in front of him as he swam toward shore, and John just watched him a moment, savoring the feeling in his chest, a warm smell he wasn’t quite ready to give a name to yet, tonight already holding enough revelations.

And then he bolted forward, because, head start or no, he was still going to kick Sherlock’s ass.
John tucked his hands into his pockets, shoulders hunching as he walked up the narrow path to the Holmes’ front door. He turned when he got to the porch, throwing a wave over his shoulder to his mother—still lingering where she’d dropped him off—as he rang the doorbell, and she honked the horn briefly in farewell before the woods behind her washed in red as she reversed back out to the street.

The door swung open in front of him, drawing his attention back and revealing a pale face scowling out into the dark.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Sherlock snapped, repeating the sentiment he’d expressed several times over the past two days, John’s inbox nearly full because of it.

“The fire you set last year would beg to differ,” John replied, bobbing his head to prompt Sherlock to move, and, begrudgingly, the boy swept aside to let him enter.

“It was barely a fire,” Sherlock muttered, locking the door behind him, “and I put it out.”

“Yeah,” John replied, turning back to Sherlock in the marble entryway, “after it burned through your curtains.”

Sherlock glared at him, and John smiled, casting an aimless glance around.

“So where’d your parents go anyway?” he asked, voice echoing around the foyer—a massive room with wings leading off to the parlor and dining room on either side, as well as a grand staircase straight ahead.

“Some charity something-or-other,” Sherlock replied, flicking his wrist, and John chuckled.

“On Halloween?” he asked, and Sherlock tilted his head at him.

“It’s Halloween?” he inquired, and John nodded, raising a brow. “Hmm,” Sherlock hummed, looking thoughtfully across at the staircase, “that would explain the masks. At any rate.” He shrugged, beckoning John with a bob of his dark curls as he headed back toward the stairs.

“You really didn’t know it was Halloween?” John smirked as they climbed toward Sherlock’s room, and Sherlock flicked a brief glare back at him.
“No,” he snapped, and John laughed. “What? These charities things have weird themes all the time. I didn’t know the masks were for Halloween.”

“What kind of masks?” John asked as they started down the corridor, their footsteps heavy on the hardwood. “Those fancy masquerade things or, like, full-on Frankenstein?”

Sherlock chuckled, pushing open his door. “The former,” he said, crossing the room to his desk as John moved in behind him.

“So, whadya wanna do?” John asked, hovering at the end of the bed, his hands slipping into his pockets.

Sherlock shrugged, shifting at some books on his desk. “I don’t know, my mother figured- Wait.” He turned, frowning across at John. “It’s Halloween.”

John blinked at him, quirking a brow. “Yes, I believe we’ve established that.”

“No, I mean,” Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes, “weren’t you going to some party or something?”

John had hoped he’d escaped this when Sherlock didn’t immediately mention it, but, of course, the detective could never make things easy. “Yeah, I thought about it,” he muttered, looking down at his feet as he kicked at the carpet, “but none of the rugby guys were going, so-

“I thought you were going with Mary.”

John blinked several times in an aborted flinch. “She-She changed her mind.”

“You’re lying.”

John sighed, looking up to meet sure steel eyes.

“You cancelled on her again,” Sherlock stated, and John’s shoulders shifted. “John!” Sherlock huffed, rolling his head to the ceiling. “You didn’t have to do that! My mother could have found someone else!”

“I know I didn’t have to,” John sputtered, but Sherlock only continued his ranting.

“Mrs. Hudson could have stayed over half-term or something. You can’t keep cancelling on Mary!”


“What?” Sherlock spluttered, seemingly astounded. “No, I- Of course I don’t care about that!” He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “I’m just tired of her glaring at me all the time.”

John’s lips popped apart in momentary surprise, and then he laughed, shaking his head at the floor. “Well,” he chuckled, shrugging a shoulder, “she didn’t really care about it tonight.”

Sherlock cast a suspicious look over him, but John hadn’t been lying, so, after a moment, Sherlock simply turned back to his desk.

“So,” John clipped, ambling forward, “you were saying?”
“I was?” Sherlock muttered over his shoulder, and John smiled.

“Yeah,” he affirmed, moving up to lean against the desk at Sherlock’s side. “Something about your mum?”

“Oh, yes,” Sherlock said, scribbling something on a notepad in front of him, something about maggot larva that John probably didn’t want to know about. “She said a lot of channels were running horror movie marathons, so we could watch one of those.”

“Really?” John asked, dipping his head skeptically at the man. “You wanna watch a scary movie?”

“Sure,” Sherlock replied, shrugging as he straightened up to meet John’s eyes. “Why wouldn’t I?”

John stared at him, his mouth slowly quivering into a smirk.

“What?” Sherlock demanded, shuffling his weight between his feet, and John burst out into a laugh.

“Nothing,” he chirped, palms lifting to his shoulders, “I’m just wondering when I should start checking the closets for monsters.”

Sherlock gave him a flat look, and John grinned at him. “I was 12,” Sherlock snapped, and John chuckled, pushing off his hip as he started back across the room.

“Well, let’s go see what a difference four years makes,” he teased, laughing as Sherlock glared at him, but the brunette did follow him out into the corridor as they headed down to the media room.

Well, Sherlock called it a media room, anyway, but John was fonder of ‘Holmes Theatre’. He wasn’t sure what else you would call a room full of massive reclining chaise lounge chairs, a wall’s worth of a projector screen, and an actual popcorn machine, but Sherlock only rolled his eyes whenever John said it, insisting it would have been much more elaborate if they had been intending it to be a home theatre. Which, of course, was a sentiment that made John both curious and uncomfortable, never entirely growing accustomed to just how much money Sherlock and his family had. They just seemed so normal—the bickering brothers, the embarrassing parents—it was difficult for John to remember they were an entirely different breed.

Not that he minded, especially settling into the comfortable leather chair and hitting the button to extend the footrest. He always held it longer at first, extending the back of the chair until he was lying down so far, he was practically upside-down, and then he giggled to himself, Sherlock shaking his head down at him.

“Are you going to do that every time?”

“Yes!” John chirped, hitting the other button to right himself again, and Sherlock chuckled, settling beside him.

The chairs were massive, and set far apart, so it had become commonplace for them to share one, their talking between chairs having distracted the others when they were younger and sometimes watched things with the entire family. They were probably too old for it now—Sherlock 16 and John 17—but they still fit comfortably enough, provided they adjusted so Sherlock’s bony hip wasn’t digging into John’s side.

“So,” John said, taking the remote Sherlock passed to him and beginning to click through the channels, “whadya think?”

Sherlock shrugged, his shoulder scraping John’s. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of any of them
“Really?” John asked, casting a sidelong glance, Sherlock’s face lit up blue from the TV guide. “None of them?”

Sherlock scanned over the screen again briefly, and then shook his head. “No,” he confirmed, shaking his head.

“The Ring?” John asked, continuing to scroll.

“No.”

“The Grudge?”

“No.”

“The Others?”

“Do all scary movies start with ‘the’?”

John chuckled, shaking his head. “What about *Halloween*?”

“What about it?”

“The movie *Halloween,*” John clarified, bobbing the remote at the screen. “Have you heard of that one?”

“That’s the guy in the mask, right?” Sherlock asked, turning to him with a frown. “Mike Myers? But not the Austin Powers one?”

John laughed, head tipping back to brush the leather. “That would be a *very* different movie,” he chuckled, shaking his head, and then nodded across at Sherlock. “But, yeah, that’s the one. Wanna watch that?”

“I told you,” Sherlock muttered, shrugging as he wriggled further down into the chair, head shrinking toward John’s shoulder, “it makes no difference to me.”

“Well, alright then,” John replied, selecting the program. “Might as well watch that one then. More festive.”

Sherlock snorted, and John smiled down at him, and then they fell silent, the notorious music beginning to play from the surround sound system.

They talked for a while, John giggling every time Sherlock insisted he did *not* jump, and then fell silent, the movie rolling on in front of them as they sat pressed together between the arm rests. John paid attention as long as he could, but he had seen the movie before, and, on top of that, he had other concerns pushing in to nibble the pit deeper into his stomach. Soon enough, he gave up entirely, and just watched Sherlock.

The brunette’s skin flashed with the shifting scenes, his expression twitching through quiet concentration, disgust, and fear, and John’s chest ached as he watched, unspoken words clogging up his throat.

He had to tell him; he had to. He’d *planned* to, had intended to pretty much open with it as soon as he’d arrived, but it was so *easy* with Sherlock, so easy to slip back into comfortable patterns and banter that stayed far away from feelings, and, essentially, he’d chickened out. His heart picked up in
his chest, and he fought the urge to shift away, the risk of Sherlock feeling it through their flush arms significantly less than what he’d see if John moved and make him look up, so John just focused on his breathing, trying to steady it as he went over his speech again.

He wanted to blame Mary, but that wasn’t fair, and, though he was apparently oblivious when it came to a lot of things, he knew that much at least. Mary had been a saint, always understanding when John would have to run off to help Sherlock with an experiment or bail him out of jail. She would just smile and nod, telling him to call her when he got home, and he would kiss her cheek and dart away, thinking he was the luckiest guy in the world to have found someone who finally understood his relationship with Sherlock. And, perhaps, he hadn’t been wrong about that, because, two days ago, when John had told her he couldn’t go to the party, she had asked him why.

‘Because I have to stay with Sherlock,’ he had said, thinking he’d already explained this. ‘He sort of set his room on fire last year, and now his parents don’t let him stay alone.’

‘No, John,’ she’d replied, shaking her head as she reached across the table and laid a hand over his, ‘I mean why do you always cancel?’

John hadn’t understood, frowning and tilting his head, and Mary had smiled, the same soft one she always had when John said he had to leave, but, this time, he finally saw the hint of sadness clinging to the edges.

‘Why do you always leave to help Sherlock?’

‘Well, because he needs help,’ John had replied, oblivious.

‘Sherlock could take care of himself, you know that,’ Mary had gently reminded him. ‘Half the time, he doesn’t even call you, you just remember he said something about an experiment at school that day and assume he’ll need help with it.’

John had blinked at her, still perplexed. ‘You did hear the part about setting his room on fire, right?’

Mary had just laughed, rattling her head down to the table. ‘Yes, I did, but John,’ she’d said, and he’d realized with the shift of her tone just how serious a turn the conversation had taken, ‘surely you must know? I mean, have you ever thought about why? Why do you do all that for Sherlock? Why you always take his calls and bring the biscuits he likes with your lunch because you know he’d rather steal them than admit he likes chocolate digestives?’

John could still feel it now, the clench in his stomach at her words, and he’d swallowed, pushing down the frantic knowing trying to reach his brain. ‘I-I don’t.’

‘Look, John,’ Mary had interrupted, gentle as always, ‘I like you, I do, but…well, I like me too.’ She’d smiled then, a goodbye written across the curve of her lips. ‘And I don’t want to be someone’s second choice. And I don’t want you to settle for your second choice.’

‘What are you—’ he’d begun, but Mary hadn’t even let him start lying to himself.

‘John, you choose Sherlock,’ she had said, quick and concise and heartbeatingly true, and there was nothing John could do but drop his eyes. ‘Every time, you choose him. And I think- I think, if you were honest with yourself…you’d always choose him. For everything.’ She’d leaned further forward then, gripping his hand in both of hers, and he’d dared to look up at her, but she was still only smiling at him, her too-big heart glowing through. ‘John, if you tell me right now that you want to be with me, I’ll drop it, and we’ll never talk about it again. But, if you want to be with Sherlock… Well, I don’t want to get in the way of that. I don’t want to be your excuse.’
‘You’re not-’ 

‘I know you never meant to,’ Mary had interjected, lifting a hand, ‘but…I think it became that, somewhere along the line. Me, this relationship. It became a shield, something you could hide behind and not have to ask yourself the hard questions. But I’m asking now.’ She had looked at him so firmly in that moment, fixed him with eyes so focused, they reminded him instantly of Sherlock’s gaze, which, of course, answered her question before it was even asked. ‘What do you want?’

John blinked at Sherlock’s profile, several minutes having passed by without his notice. Over 48 hours he’d had to mull over the conversation with Mary, to find the words and the courage to actually do something about it, but he hadn’t yet, and, sitting here pressed against Sherlock, the light shadowing beneath his cheekbones as he bit his lip through the chase scenes, John was only feeling more lost.

“Alright, I let that last one go,” Sherlock suddenly blurted, thrusting a hand toward the screen, “but this is just ridiculous! There’s no way the blood would spatter like that, not with a wound in that location, it’s nowhere near an-. What?” His brows twitched down as he narrowed his eyes, having turned to find John staring at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I-” John stammered, trying to pull coherent words from his brain, which seemed to prefer waxing poetic about the different shades of Sherlock’s eyes. “I broke up with Mary,” he spluttered, and then blinked, his face likely looking just as surprised as Sherlock’s because what the hell was that!?


“Wednesday,” John replied, not quite ready to tackle that first question yet, “after I told her I couldn’t go to the party.”

Sherlock tilted his head, curious. “Was it- Was that why?” he pressed, eyes widening. “Did you- Was it because of me? Because you- I promise I won’t set anything on fire,” he urged, shaking his head. “You-You can go. Try and-and talk to her. If you want.”

John was terrified, he really was, but something in the tension around Sherlock’s eyes, the slight quiver in his voice, gave him a spark of hope, which quickly led to courage, and he forced his mouth open. “No, it-it wasn’t you,” he assured, twisting toward the brunette, their knees layering. “Well, not really. Not in the way you mean.”

“Then what was it?” Sherlock questioned, strangely quiet, and something settled over them then, a sort of expectant buzz in the air.

“It- Me,” John answered with a breathless shrug. “I- She asked me-” He took a breath, looking down to the space between them a moment, which shrunk with every synchronized push and pull of air. “She asked why I always cancel on her. Why I’m okay always cancelling on her.”

“And?” Sherlock prompted when John didn’t continue, couldn’t continue, the next words not having come to him yet.

“And,” John started, blinking back up to grey eyes, and he was instantly calmed, the silver gaze steadying in its familiarity, “I think- I think it’s because…wherever I am, whatever I’m doing…it just- I’d rather be with you.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything, didn’t so much as gasp.

John swallowed, but forced himself not to look away, and then to barrel on. “I’d always rather be
with you,” he nearly whispered, “and I- I mean, if-if you- I would~”

“John,” Sherlock interjected, voice soft and earnest, and, when John’s vision stopped blurring, he could see the pulse leaping in the man’s neck, “are you- Are you saying-” He didn’t finish, but he didn’t really have to, and, before he could think better of it, John nodded, and Sherlock’s jaw dropped in shock.

“Yeah,” he breathed, “I- Sherlock, I-”

The chair bobbed beneath him, air rushing out of him in a gust as his back hit the armrest, and he barely had time to figure out those were fingers around the back of his neck before Sherlock’s lips were on his, and that was about the last fully formed thought he had.

Sherlock kissed him hard, his chest pressed to John’s as he pinned him down, and John was stunned by the ferocity of it for a moment until Sherlock sucked lightly on his bottom lip, and then John’s hand snapped to his hair, a groan vibrating between them that could have come from anyone.

He pushed back against Sherlock’s mouth, fingers firm in his hair, and couldn’t for the life of him believe he was kissing Sherlock Holmes, that Sherlock Holmes was kissing him back, but it smelled like him, tasted like the type of tea he preferred, and, as John bit lightly on his lip, the moan that ground from the pale throat sounded like him.

It was nothing like a first kiss, not any one John had had anyway. It wasn’t soft and tentative and testing, but rough and demanding and certain, as if they’d moved through all the delicacies long ago, and, as John gripped his fingers tight to Sherlock’s waist, tugging him down, he wondered if, in their own way, they had. It wasn’t entirely comfortable, however, John bent a bit backward over the arm of the chair, and, without thinking, he grabbed Sherlock’s hips, shifting himself centered on the seat as he slung the man over his lap.

Sherlock gasped, his curls bouncing as he landed, legs straddling John, and John froze, worried he’d gone too far.

“I- I’m sorry, I-” he stammered, pulling his hands off Sherlock’s hip, but Sherlock cut him off. He grabbed John’s wrist, pining his hand back into place. His breaths hissed through the air, ragged puffs that shook at his chest, and his lips were flushed as they quaked around the dragging oxygen. Grey eyes fixed on John, nearly entirely washed with black, and John felt his entire body burst into flames beneath the gaze, heat flooding his stomach.

“Fuck,” he panted, entirely unconsciously, and Sherlock had the nerve to smirk before he pounced back down, tugging at John’s neck to tilt his chin up.

His tongue immediately pushed past John’s lips, and John’s head spun, his fingers gripping harder into the fabric of Sherlock’s jeans, which, in turn, prompted a groan from the detective, and then John lost his head completely.

He lifted one hand into Sherlock’s curls, pulling hard as he twisted the man’s mouth on his, his own tongue swirling around Sherlock’s as the brunette trembled against his chest.

Sherlock’s fingers dug into the stripes of John’s jumper, scraping against the skin, and John hissed, pulling off Sherlock’s mouth to latch onto his neck, and Sherlock made a sound John was fairly certain he could never hear enough.

John didn’t know what he was doing, where this was going, or what he wanted, only that this wasn’t enough, but it might still have been for the best that footsteps thumped against the floor above them,
followed by a shout.

“Sherlock?” Violet called, and John pulled off Sherlock’s neck with a final scrape of teeth.

“Fuck,” he said again, but this time with frustration, and Sherlock chuckled, dropping his forehead to John’s.

“John?” Violet continued, her footsteps nearing the stairs, and John shifted, lifting his face to tell Sherlock they should move when the brunette pinned him back against the chair with a searing kiss.

“Stay,” he whispered when he pulled away, fingers swirling circles in the hair at the base of John’s scalp, and John shivered, the word taking a moment to make sense in his delirium.

“What?” he questioned, blinking up at the blurry figure. “Like…tonight?”

“For starters,” Sherlock said, pulling away to smile down at him, a sheepish curl of his lips that broke John’s heart in the best possible way.

In answer, he pulled Sherlock down by the collar of his navy jumper, but the kiss was gentle, a soft confirmation, and then he threw him to the side, the media room door opening just as Sherlock fell into position beside him.

“Hey, boys!” Violet chirped, moving to stand beside them. “What are we watching?” she asked, turning toward the screen, and John blinked after her gaze, not entirely sure anymore.

“Er, *Halloween*,” he said, hoping they hadn’t accidentally changed the channel at some point, but there was someone screaming through the woods, so it seemed like a safe bet.

“That’s the one with the guy who’s not Austin Powers, right?” the woman asked, and John chuckled, nodding. “Well, I’ll leave you to it,” she said, waving a hand at the screen. “Your father did very well, by the way,” she said, touching a tap to Sherlock’s shoulder. “His speech was fantastic. You really made it sound like him this time.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, ready to retort, but his mother waved a hand at him.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell him I know,” she muttered dismissively, and Sherlock ducked his head, sucking his lips around a smile. “Are you staying with us tonight, John?” she then asked, eyebrows lifting in inquiry, and John pointedly avoided looking anywhere near Sherlock as he smiled.

“Yeah, I-I thought I might,” he replied, not sounding nearly as wrecked as he felt, “if that’s okay.”

“Oh, of course,” Violet assured, batting his concern away as she headed back toward the door. “And thanks again for coming over on such short notice. I trust he behaved himself?” She cast a fond look at Sherlock, apparently thinking she was making a joke, but John’s stomach fell through the floor.

“Yes,” John chirped, nodding as Sherlock coughed, and John had to violently suppress the urge to slap him.

“Good,” Violet replied, beaming down at them before resuming her exit. “I’ll probably be in bed by the time you come up, but make sure to drop by your father’s office, ask him how the evening went and whatnot. You know how he likes to gloat.” She smiled, quirking her brows, and Sherlock chuckled, nodding up at her. “Night, boys,” she bade, and they chorused the sentiment back to her.

They stared at the door long after she closed it behind her, her footsteps clicking up the steps and out of range before they moved, Sherlock immediately bursting into laughter.
John shoved him, accidentally toppling him over the side of the chair, and then scrambled over, eyes wide. “Are you okay?” he spluttered, but Sherlock appeared uninjured, clutching at his sides as he lay on the floor.

“Your face!” Sherlock gasped, and John’s expression fell to a glower. “Oh my god, your face!”

John glared, and Sherlock only laughed harder, rolling onto his side. “I’ll leave,” John threatened, nodding his head down at him. “I will. I’ll get up right now and-”

Sherlock suddenly popped up in front of him, his lips pressing against John’s just light enough to stall the words. “No, you won’t,” he chirped, smiling fond and certain.

John narrowed his eyes at him, but did slide back over to his side of the chair, Sherlock laughing as he clamored in next to him, and, as his head settled on John’s shoulder, John quite forgot what he was mad about.
Chapter Summary

Prompt: Teenlock prompt: John loves halloween but he’s a bit old to go trick or treating so he volunteers to go with his cousins and makes his best friend Sherlock come with him and dress up. Sherlock deduces the best routes and best candy houses & ends up being the absolute best at halloween because they decorate John’s driveway to be extra spooky and the little kids absolutely love him and then the kids get picked up and John and Sherlock are home alone and... - anonymous

It’s also established relationship again, just so ya know!

“What about that one, Sherlock?”

“Health-conscious. Carrot slices, if I had to guess.”

“Blech! Ooo, how about that one? With the mummy?”

“Full-size chocolate bars.”

“SWEET! Come with me to the door!”

“What?”

“No, I want him to come with me!”

“We’re going to the same door, stupid!”

“John?”

John chuckled, grinning at Sherlock’s panicked eyes blinking at him, and the detective glared before turning once again to the two kids tugging at his arms. “Why don’t you two go ahead?” John suggested, bobbing his head back at the door of the house in question. “Sherlock and I will wait for you here.”

“But then Sherlock won’t get any candy,” Kyle said, the younger of John’s two cousins at 7.

“I wouldn’t get any candy either,” John remarked, but that appeared to be none of anyone’s concern, and the kids began tugging at Sherlock’s arms again, wailing over which one of them got to go to the door with him.

“Oh, for chri-”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock sighed, closing his eyes in restraint. “We can all go,” he nearly snapped, and the kids broke into a cheer. “Stop that!” Sherlock barked, but it was no use, and he was dragged away, John laughing as he leaned against the fence to await their return.
When John had gotten saddled with his cousins for trick-or-treating—his aunt laid up after throwing out her back, and his uncle away on a business trip—it had put a bit of a wrench into his Halloween plans. He’d made a list of the scariest episodes of *Doctor Who*, triple-checked they were all available on Netflix, and quadruple-checked that Sherlock’s parents weren’t getting back until tomorrow night so he could spend the evening scaring the man out of his wits and under John’s arm. Sherlock really was adorable pretending not to be terrified, eyes wide and jaw shifting as his voice grew higher and higher with every assertion he was fine, but, alas, some things were just not meant to be, and at least Sherlock had agreed to come with them.

What John hadn’t counted on was that he would be replaced, his cousins taking to Sherlock the second he’d been right about one house only giving out gum. Since then, Kyle and David hadn’t left his side, asking him question after question as they tugged on the sleeves of his white pirate shirt. It had taken a bit more work for John to get Sherlock to agree to a costume, but he’d been a bit more open to it once John had told him he’d be going as a sailor. After about an hour’s worth of terrible puns—planks to booty to swords and beyond—Sherlock had agreed, but only after obtaining John’s word he would leave the innuendo at home for the evening. It was proving very difficult, however, with the laces of Sherlock’s shirt loose over his chest, exposing a small V descending from his neck, and the black trousers clinging to the curves of his hips and ass before flowing down to tuck into his boots.

And, on top of that—where John wished he was right now, incidentally—it was almost unfair how alluring it was watching Sherlock with his cousins. John had had previous girlfriends mention how attractive it was watching him interact with his young cousins, but he’d never thought he would be susceptible to that. But, as the trio returned, Sherlock bending down toward their small heads and pointing this way and that across the house’s lawn, John’s heart swelled in his chest, pushing the oxygen out of his lungs to make room.

“There’s a handicap placard hanging off their rearview mirror,” he was saying as they approached, pointing at a minivan parked on the street, “but there’s also one of those horrible little plastic play structures in the back garden.”

“How did you see that?” David asked, the more outspoken one at 9.

“Because I’m taller than the fence,” Sherlock replied, and John sucked his lips in over his teeth to suppress a snort. “So, what does that tell you about the couple who lives there?”

The two brothers thought a moment, frowning as their little hands twisted in Sherlock’s cuffs.

“They have kids?” Kyle finally offered, and Sherlock shook his head.

“No, they have that handicap placard, remember?” he gently reminded, and John was going to melt into a puddle on the pavement. “So they’re likely older, their own children having moved out.”

“Grandkids!” David blurted, and Kyle stamped a foot, glaring at him.

“I was gonna say that!” he spouted, and David stuck his tongue out at him.

“I’m sure you were,” Sherlock soothed, and Kyle calmed a bit, though his eyes were still narrowed across at his brother, “and you’re right, the play structure seems most probably for grandchildren. The structure has shifted slightly, revealing the dead grass beneath, which suggests it’s been there for some time. The children don’t live here, otherwise the couple likely wouldn’t be in for Halloween, so they must visit often. No one looks out at that eyesore of a castle every morning unless they really love kids, so they must be nostalgic for when their own were younger, thus why they work so hard to please the grandchildren *and*”—he paused for dramatic effect, bobbing his head pointedly down
toward them, “why you get full-size Snickers.”

The two kids blinked at him, awestruck, their mouths agape, and Sherlock flashed a tentative look up at John, who only shrugged.

“Wow,” Kyle breathed, eyes bright with wonder. “You talk so fast.”

Sherlock frowned, tilting his head at him, and John laughed, intervening before Sherlock could get offended.

“Let’s keep going,” he said, batting them forward down the pavement with his hands. “We only have a half hour or so left.”

“But we don’t have to be back until 9:30!”

“And it’s almost 9,” John answered, lifting his brows pointedly at David, who looked instantly frantic.

“Come on, Kyle!” David cried, releasing Sherlock to rush past his legs and grab his brother’s arm. “We have to hurry! Which one next, Sherlock?”

“Two up on the right,” the brunette answered, bobbing his head onward. “The one with the inflatable pumpkin.”

The kids took off, running ahead, their short legs racing at a nearly even pace to Sherlock and John’s strides as they kept up behind them.

They stopped at the edge of the path, watching the kids barreling up to the door, and John chuckled, shaking his head as he folded his arms over his white uniform. “Well, you’re a big hit,” he muttered, nodding up to Sherlock, who tilted his head inquiringly. “I think they like you more than I do,” he added, and Sherlock scoffed.

“That would be disturbing,” he replied, and John laughed, moving to nudge the pirate on the arm.

“They do like you though,” he assured, smiling softly up at the brunette, who shifted his gaze back to the door, his neck reddening.


“Not entirely insufferable?” he mocked, and Sherlock’s mouth twitched with a smile before he turned his head away, prompting John into a laugh. He shifted, leaning subtly against Sherlock’s side, a gesture he hoped conveyed just how much he would really like to kiss him in that moment, and, as Sherlock gently pressed back, it seemed the mission had been accomplished.

“Awh, isn’t that cute?”

Instantly, the air around them crackled with tension, their bodies stiffening, and they sighed in synchronized exasperation before turning on their heels.

“A sailor and a pirate,” Jim Moriarty continued, sneering at them in a tailored tuxedo. “Forbidden love,” he breathed dramatically, and John’s eyes twitched as Jim laughed. “Tell me,” he clipped, lifting an airy wave into the air as he ambled toward them, “which one of you is the topsail?”

John’s fingers gripped into his biceps where his arms were crossed, his jaw snapping stiff, but it was
Sherlock who spoke.

“Alone tonight, Jim?” he quipped, tilting his head with faux interest. “Sebastian didn’t come back from uni for your little Batman and Robin act?”

John blinked, searching back over what he’d assumed was a James Bond costume, but, if Sherlock said it was Bruce Wayne, it probably was.

Jim’s eyes flashed, his fingers curling into fists. “He has midterms,” he snapped, and Sherlock frowned.

“Midterms?” he repeated curiously. “That’s an odd name for his new boyfriend. Is he foreign exchange?”

John snorted, Jim huffing a furious breath out of his nose, and John imagined for a moment he could actually see the silver shards of daggers shooting from the man’s eyes.

Then, Jim laughed, stilted with venom. “Enjoy it while you can, Holmes,” he taunted icily. “Only a matter of time before it’s you.”

John frowned, momentarily confused, but the detective seemed to have understood, jaw snapping shut as something trembled through his eyes.

Jim smiled, slow and taunting. “So, John?” he asked, and John’s skin crawled under his gaze. “How’s Bart’s?”

John glared, though he did not immediately understand what to be angry at, and then it hit him, a punch to the gut that had him stepping furiously forward.

“They had flying saucers!” David cried, brandishing the bag of multicolored sweets in his hands, his larger one rattling at his side.

John stepped back, jaw twitching across at Jim’s lingering smirk, but there was nothing for it now, and he turned to his cousin, trying to smile. “That’s great, Dave,” he said, nodding down at the smiling boy. “Why don’t you put them in your bag so you don’t drop ‘em, okay? You know how easy they can crack.”

David nodded fervently, slipping the sweets into his large cotton sack as Kyle passed behind him, frowning quizzically at something.

“Are you James Bond?” he asked, and John whirled around, realizing who he must have been talking to.

Jim blinked, staggering back as though the child were poisonous. “What?”


Jim’s mouth moved soundlessly a moment, looking between John and Sherlock, as if mortally offended they would let this small creature speak to him. “I- No,” he sputtered, rattling his head, “I’m Bruce Wayne.”

“Like Batman?” David interjected, moving forward, and Jim’s eyes widened at the additional approach, but he did nod. “Then why aren’t you just Batman?” David asked, and John blinked, surprised at the reasonability of the question.
“I- I am,” Jim replied, but David shook his head, very sure of himself.

“No really. Not real Batman,” he insisted. “You don’t have a mask or a Batmobile. Or a Robin.”

John and Sherlock choked in unison, John having to lift the back of his hand to his mouth to hold in his laugh.

Jim glared down at the boy, extending it up to John and Sherlock like they had somehow coached him, and then turned on his heels, stomping away.

“What?” David asked, looking up to where John was silently shaking. “It’s true. He’s not really Batman.”

“No, he’s not,” Sherlock said, apparently not finding this as funny as John, seeing as he was able to speak. “Now, which house do you wanna try next?”

“Can we go with Katherine and Peter?” David countered, looking up to John once again, who stopped laughing, frowning down at the boy before he noticed the princess and doctor he was pointing toward.

Mrs. Helm waved at him, and John lifted a hand back, her two kids eagerly joining in as they flailed their hands through the air.

He pointed down toward David, tilting his head in mimed inquiry, and Mrs. Helm nodded, evidently having already given permission.

“She said she could take us back to mum’s,” David said, eyes sparkling with undeniable hope, “and then you and Sherlock can go to your Halloween party.”

“Halloween party?” John asked, and David nodded.

“Yeah,” he chirped, “that’s what you said before we left. That you were gonna get a lot of use out of the costumes and it was gonna be a party.”

Sherlock clapped a hand to his mouth, eyes closing as he trembled with mirth, but John’s stomach vanished from his body, his throat closing up as his eyes snapped wide.

“I- Yes,” John croaked, clearing his throat. “A Halloween party. We’re-We’re going to a Halloween party.”

Sherlock was silent, but his one arm did lift to wrap rather tightly around his stomach as he continued to quake.

“Yeah, you can go,” John acquiesced, and the boys cheered, bouncing up and down on their feet with a chorus of thank-yous. “Just make sure to listen to Mrs. Helm, alright? And behave,” he added sternly, waggling a finger down at them, “or I’m sure you’ll mum will hear about it.”

The boys nodded obediently, and then took off, Kyle running directly there, but David stalled, turning hesitantly back.

“I-”

“The house with the spider webs has Lion bars,” Sherlock said, tipping his head to the left. “You can see the bowl through the window.”

David beamed at him, and John frowned between them, definitely missing something. “Thank you!”
he called, and then raced off after his brother, the princess smiling brightly at him as he drew up to her side.

John stepped forward, casting a look up to Sherlock. “What was that about?” he asked, and a small smile twitched at Sherlock’s full lips.

“He wanted to impress that girl,” Sherlock said, nodding at the retreating backs of the group, and John snapped his head back to them, mouth gaping.

“Katherine!??” he spluttered, and Sherlock nodded. “David- David fancies Katherine!!?”

Sherlock turned down to him, brow lifting. “You really don’t see anything, do you?” he mocked, chuckling as John flipped up a glare. “Although, I suppose that shouldn’t surprise me anymore,” he muttered, turning and heading back to where John had parked the car at the bottom of the street. “It did take you ten years to figure out you liked me.”

“At least half of those don’t count,” John contested. “We were kids. I thought I was going to be an astronaut.”

“And now you’re going to be a doctor,” Sherlock said, tipping a smile down to him. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

John chuckled, nudging him on the arm, and then stayed close, their elbows brushing with their strides.

They were quiet for a time, dodging laughing kids with frantic parents chasing after them, and John took the opportunity to look out over the houses, alternating between impressed and appalled as they passed the decorations.

Finally, they reached the car, John unlocking it before slipping inside, and then they were off, cautiously weaving through the residential streets until they made it back to the motorway.

Sherlock leaned against the window, his head pillowed on a crooked arm, and John’s brow steadily furrowed as he glanced at him, growing disturbed by the uncharacteristic silence.

“Hey?” he prompted gently, stretching a hand across to rest gently on Sherlock’s thigh, and the detective stirred, turning to blink at him. “Are you alright?” John asked, frowning at him when he could spare a look. “You’re awfully quiet.”

Sherlock held his gaze a moment, silently considering, and then shrugged, turning back to the window. “It’s- It’s stupid,” he muttered, and John shook his head.

“No, it’s not,” he asserted, tugging lightly as Sherlock tried to twist his head away. “If it’s bothering you, it’s not stupid. Tell me.”
Sherlock did not reply, eyes blinking down toward the dashboard as he picked at his fingernails in his lap, and John frowned, going over possibilities in his mind.

“Is it- Is it what Jim said?” he asked, feeling Sherlock’s spine stiffen beneath his palm. “Because he was just running his mouth off, Sherlock, you know that.” He swirled his thumb through the base of Sherlock’s curls before sweeping his fingers back down to the collar of the man’s shirt. “That stuff he said, that’s- That’s not gonna be us.”

“Why not?” Sherlock asked, flicking a taut glance across at him, and John’s hand temporarily froze over a knot on Sherlock’s spine. “It’s the same situation. Jim and I are in our last year of secondary school, and Seb and you are at uni.”

John blinked out at the road, mouth fluttering in shock. “I- Well, yeah, but- Sherlock,” he stammered, turning toward the boy, “you can’t possibly think- We’re nothing like them!”

“How?” Sherlock spat, twisting away, and John’s hand fell to the armrest between them. “It’s exactly the same thing! I’m here, and you’re there, and it’s only a matter of time before-”

“I swear to god, Sherlock, if you say what I think you’re about to say-”

“But it’s true!” Sherlock cried, hands pleading anxiously between them as John’s fingers tightened on the wheel. “We can’t- It’s just too much! I mean, you’ve already started cancelling Skype calls-”

“Rescheduling, Sherlock!” John bit, flashing a glare at him. “And only for a few hours. I can’t believe you really think-”

“But that’s how it starts!” Sherlock interjected helplessly. “Cancelling, rescheduling, whatever,” he amended as John’s mouth opened. “And then the calls get farther and farther apart, and the texts get fewer and fewer, and then, all of a sudden, you have this entire life that I’m not a part of.”

“That will never-”

“How can you know that!??”

John flinched, hands aching with the force of his grip on the steering wheel.

Sherlock huffed out a pained sigh, shaking his head. “It’s the same thing, John. The same thing! How can you say it won’t happen to us too?”

“Because it won’t.”

“Just because you want that to be true doesn’t mean-”

“I don’t want it to be true, I know it’s true.”

“How!??”

“BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!” John shouted, the tension in his body finally cracking loose, and Sherlock’s mouth dropped open, eyes blinking wide. “Because I hate being away from you, because I write fucking quotes in the margins of my notebooks so I can tell you exactly what ridiculous things I heard around campus that day!”

Sherlock’s brow creased, uncertainty written over his face. He was watching John intently, and, as John breathed, calming slowly as he swallowed, heart thundering in his chest, Sherlock’s eyes began
“So, don’t tell me it’s the same,” John said brokenly, shaking his head out at the street, “because it’s not. No matter how similar it is, it’s not the same. This is us, Sherlock.” He shrugged, casting a glance at the brunette, who was still staring at him, something like awe in his eyes. “Not Jim, not Seb, not anyone. And I don’t care, I don’t care what data you probably have or percentages you’ve worked out, because I love you. So, fuck it.” He shook his head, looking back to find Sherlock smiling softly. “Fuck all of it, because none of those people have ever been us. And, whatever odds you have…we’ll beat them.”

Sherlock dragged in a rough breath, and John turned to find him staring, eyes glittering as a stiff swallow moved down his throat.

John stretched out an arm, catching Sherlock’s hand, and Sherlock immediately latched onto it, intertwining their fingers. “We will,” John swore, a whisper in the dark between them as he traced his thumb over the back of Sherlock’s hand, and Sherlock, his breaths still quivering, nodded.

It was a moment before they spoke again, John trailing patterns over Sherlock’s skin as the detective’s breathing slowly became more even, the streetlamps along the motorway passing in yellow stripes across their skin.

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“Do you really?” Sherlock eventually murmured, lifting his free hand to graze lightly at John’s wrist. “Love me,” he clarified as John frowned across at him, a tremulous smile on his face, and John looked back to the road, stomach twisting.

“Yes,” he said, and Sherlock grinned broadly in his peripheral vision, “but can we pretend I didn’t say that for the first time during an argument in my car?”

“Probably not,” Sherlock chuckled, drawing his legs up onto the seat. “But, for the record,” he said, leaning across the armrest to place his head on John’s shoulder, “I love you too.”

John’s breath hitched in a gasp, and he probably would have passed out if he hadn’t had to keep it together to drive, his stomach leaping with unquantifiable glee. “See, yours was so much better,” he whined, and Sherlock laughed softly, tipping his chin up to brush a soft kiss to John’s neck.

“Don’t worry,” he assured, a slight drawl to the syllables, and John’s spine tingled as Sherlock’s words washed warm over his skin, “you can tell me again later.”

John swallowed, his eyelids stuttering in a blink as his fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

The car roared as he compressed the gas, and Sherlock lost his balance, collapsing back to John’s shoulder with a laugh, and John couldn’t help but join him, their bodies pressed warm together in the green light of the clock as they drove on ahead.
Save the Last Dance for Me

Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** I would really like to see some fem!lock in your Johnlocktober fan fiction! (Thank you so much for doing the Christmas-fan-fiction too.) You are brilliant!

**Prompt:** i don't have a particular prompt but i would love to see you write anything femlock... you are one of my favourite fic writers and i would love to see your take on it :)

**Prompt:** Are you still taking prompts? How about greaserlockkk

**Prompt:** I can't remember exactly - but did Sherlock and John dance together yet?

Femlock going to a fifties-themed Sadie Hawkins. Enjoy! Music plays a pretty big part in this fic, so I made a fifties/sixties playlist! The last song on the playlist is the one quoted near the end of the fic (Save the Last Dance for Me - The Drifters), so make sure to give that a listen!

Remember, I am going to be doing a 25 Days of Christmas thing like this as well, so send prompts in to my tumblr or here! I'll get official about calling for prompts in November, but you can send them in whenever!

“What do you mean you don’t wanna go?”

“I’m fairly certain my meaning is apparent.”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock sighed, rolling her head up from where she’d been picking at the cafeteria pizza. “I mean, I don’t want to go to Sadie Hawkins,” she said slowly, tucking a long loose curl back behind her ear as it made a move toward the gelatinous mass masquerading as chocolate pudding on her tray.

Joan frowned across at her, fringe framing her puzzled blue eyes. “Why not?”

“I’m allergic to doo-wop.”

“Sherlock, come on.” The blonde pushed her tray aside, hair grazing across her shoulders as they lifted, her elbows planted on the table. “Why do you not wanna go?”

Sherlock dropped her eyes to the tray, idly shifting at the dry crusts of her pizza. “I don’t know,” she muttered, shrugging a shoulder, “I just don’t really see the point. I mean, it’s girls ask guys, right?”

Joan nodded, hands folding beneath her chin. “Yeah, that’s what Sadie Hawkins is. It’s more of an American thing, I guess, but Irene’s really into that right now. Did you know she watched an entire season of The O.C. this past weekend alone!?”

Sherlock shook her head.
Joan and Irene were in their last year, and thus in the more senior positions on the student council, something Sherlock—being in the year below—had managed to avoid being drafted into. Irene, as president, had recruited Joan to be on the committee for the dance, thus making Joan’s room something of a minefield of decorations and idea boards for the past several weeks. They had settled on this Sadie Hawkins concept for the fall dance, and then had to make the whole thing even more ridiculous by deciding it would be a ‘50s theme. Joan having been put in charge of the music, Sherlock had heard more crooning over the past month than anyone should ever be subjected to. She dreamed in doo-wop now, and the entire cast was always in poodle skirts. Needless to say, she was contemplating therapy.

“Well, I don’t have anyone to ask,” she added with a shrug down at her pizza, glistening with grease in the fluorescent lights. “All my friends are girls. Well, actually,” she muttered, tipping her head, “all my friends are you.”

Joan chuckled, teeth bright within a pink grin. “Oh, come on, you have other friends,” she insisted, stretching an arm across to swat at the sleeve of Sherlock’s purple blouse. “Molly and Mike. And Irene too, even though you won’t admit it.”

Sherlock scoffed, drawing a smirk to Joan’s mouth. “That woman is the devil,” she urged, and Joan laughed.

“Well, if that’s true,” the blonde sighed, pulling away as she stood, “it would certainly explain why she acts like she owns my soul.”

Sherlock laughed, eyes flicking to a figure that barreled in the door behind Joan’s back. “Speak of the devil,” she mused, bobbing her head in gesture as Joan looked down at her, puzzled.

“Oh, for the love of-”

“Watson!” Irene raced across the room, heels clicking, and Joan leaned back against the table, as much distance between them as she could manage. “Where are we on the decorations?”

“Well, I can no longer find my bed,” Joan replied, and Sherlock ducked a smile, rising to standing behind her, “so I’d say we have plenty.”

“Good, good,” Irene clipped, nodding thoughtfully down at the table at Joan’s side. “Can you help me cart them into the gym? I can swing by your house tonight, pick everything up. And what’s your schedule like tomorrow, because I’d like to get a head start on the decorating.”

“Well, I-” Joan murmured, casting a glance back at Sherlock.

They’d had plans Thursday night—going to see some superhero movie that Joan was excited about and Sherlock hadn’t even heard of—but Sherlock just shrugged, acquiescing even as her heart sank.

“You can come too,” Irene said, nodding over Joan’s shoulder to Sherlock on the opposite side of the table. “Whadya say, Holmes?” she asked, sidestepping for a clear shot at Sherlock’s eyes. “Wanna summon up some school spirit and help us decorate tomorrow night?”

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow, looking between her and Joan, the latter of which shrugged helplessly, but there was a glimmer of desperation in her eyes, a plea Sherlock hated to ignore. “Fine,” she muttered, and Irene beamed, bright blue nails bobbing together as she clapped beneath her chin, “but not for very long.” She lifted a finger, hoping to quell any arguments. “I’m not standing up on a ladder all night while you fuss over whether something’s straight.”
“Oh, don’t worry, Sherlock,” she assured, with a wave of her hand as she turned, “I know better than to count on you to make anything straight.” She flashed a wink over her shoulder, Sherlock glaring at her back, and then her grey gaze shifted to where Joan was holding a laugh in with the back of her hand.

“Traitor,” she hissed, and Joan gave up, cackling as she followed Sherlock out of the cafeteria, grabbing both their trays and tipping them into the bin as they passed.

“Cheer up,” she urged, slinging an arm over Sherlock’s shoulders as they headed down the corridor toward their lockers. “It’ll be fun! At least you won’t be sitting at home by yourself.”

“True,” Sherlock replied, turning down to her, “I’ll be trapped in the gym with Irene. Much better, huge improvement.”

Joan laughed, arm sliding down Sherlock’s back as it fell away. “Well, yeah,” she admitted, tipping her head, “but I’ll be there too. And I’ll certainly be glad for the company.”

Sherlock blinked, stomach swooping as she looked down to Joan beaming up at her. Reluctantly, her own lips twitched in a smile, and Joan grinned smugly, batting an elbow against her side. “Cut it out,” Sherlock muttered, swatting the arm away, but Joan only laughed harder, escalating to poking Sherlock in the ribs as they weaved their way down the corridor.

---

“A little to the left.”

“I swear to god, Irene, if you make me move this fucking record one more time-”

“Okay!” Joan intervened, moving between them at the base of the ladder. “Let’s just- Let’s just move on, shall we? The checkered tablecloths still need to get put over the tables for the milkshake station,” she said, waving a hand across the room to where the drab plastic tables were lined against the wall. “Why don’t you get started on that, and I’ll help Sherlock finish sticking the records?”

Irene glared between them a moment, Sherlock’s dignity dropping low enough to stick her tongue out, and the woman sneered back at her before turning to take her leave.

Joan sighed, turning to peer up the ladder. “You couldn’t just move it, could you?” she asked, but her smile was fond as she shook her head.

“She already made me move it half a dozen times!” Sherlock spouted, and Joan laughed. “It’s not like they’re even! We might as well stick tape on the backs and throw them at the wall!”

“Actually not the worst idea,” Joan mused, tipping her head, and then chuckling as Sherlock glared down at her. “But we’ve gone this far already. Come on, get down.” She backed up, waving Sherlock to descend the rungs. “We’ve only got a few more sections to do.”

Although Sherlock would have to wait until Irene left to admit it, the gym actually looked quite nice. Irene had rented red circular tables and black barstools, scattered around on one side to be reminiscent of a diner. There was going to be a milkshake bar along one wall, bedecked in black-and-white check, and a burger and chips station alongside it, the catering company coming out from London. The walls were scattered with records and cutout musical notes—Sherlock’s mission for the evening—and there was a photo booth set up near the door, a surprisingly well-painted wooden visage of a blue Cadillac set up in front of a cityscape screen, chairs placed behind so it would look like the partygoers were riding in the car. The rest of the room was draped with the usual assortment of streamers, lights set up along the walls to skitter around the room in shifting colors, and the
balloons were coming in tomorrow, set to be tied to tables or let loose to color the ceiling.

Sherlock stepped cautiously down the ladder, jumping the last few rungs, and received a chiding glare from Joan before they shifted the ladder several feet to the right, starting in on the next expanse of wall.

“You sure you don’t wanna come?” Joan asked from where she was decorating the lower half, and Sherlock paused a moment in sticking a black quarter note to the painted concrete. “We can pick you up. Irene rented a limo for the committee so we would all arrive together. I could go to your house ahead of time, and then they could just—”

“No,” Sherlock interjected, rubbing over the cardstock to secure the tape beneath it. “No, I- It’s fine,” she assured, tossing down a weak smile. “I have a lot of homework. And I don’t exactly have a poodle skirt just lying around.”

“There’s that costume shop in town,” Joan offered, abandoning her work as she looked up. “I was in there last week and they still had loads of stuff left. We could go tomorrow after—”

“Joan,” Sherlock interjected, and the blonde fell silent, eyes blinking in affront. “It’s really fine, alright?” she insisted. “Like I said, I have a lot of homework.”

Joan searched over her a moment, skepticism clear in the creases of her forehead, and Sherlock sighed, stepping down a rung as she extended a hand.

“Can you pass me one of the records?” she asked.

Joan didn’t move, just frowned up at her eyes for a time, and then looked away, the knot in Sherlock’s throat relaxing as she bent down to the box at her feet. “Here,” she said as she handed it up, her voice brittle, but she would get over it, Sherlock knew.

“Thanks,” she replied, flashing an innocent smile as she took it, but Joan only continued to watch her, eyebrow quirked in suspicion. Sherlock swallowed, turning back to the wall, catching a bit of the tape between her teeth as she tugged to rip off a piece.

“You’d tell me, wouldn’t you?” Joan asked suddenly, and Sherlock blinked down at her, pulling the strip of tape from her mouth.

“Sorry?”

“If it wasn’t just homework,” the blonde clarified, moving directly beneath Sherlock where she hovered above her, “if there was some other reason you didn’t wanna go…you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

Sherlock’s fingers trembled around the record in her hand, barely avoiding a nervous swallow.

She didn’t typically make a habit of lying to Joan, and certainly not when it wasn’t for something important, like surprise parties or Christmas presents, but it seemed to be happening more and more now, the number rising in tandem with her building secrets.

“Of course,” she chirped as brightly as she could, lifting her eyes back to her task, but she could tell Joan wasn’t fooled, her neck prickling as blue eyes continued to try and bore to her heart.

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Sherlock lay on her back in her bed, the white ceiling above her having long gone dark, but she
remained too lethargic to turn on the light.

The house was quiet, the way it almost always was since Mycroft had moved out, their parents always gone on some business trip or another, but even Mrs. Hudson was missing now, having taken the weekend off to visit her sister.

Sherlock closed her eyes, grinding the heels of her hands into them. She thought about texting Mycroft, starting a fight with her older brother about his lingering freshman fifteen just for something to do, but Mycroft wasn’t really the one she needed to talk to, and distractions only served to make you feel hollower when they inevitably passed.

With a sigh, she let her arms drop back to the mattress, the grey and purple floral of the duvet shifting beneath her skin as she considered that she was being ridiculous.

Would it really help, in the end, avoiding things now? Yes, Joan was graduating this year, but not for months yet, and she might not be moving far if she got into one of the places she was applying in London. This whole avoiding memories so she had less to miss strategy might be entirely pointless, might even hurt more than help if Joan ended up staying close, but drifting away from Sherlock. That wasn’t really the reason though, and she knew it, closing her eyes as she allowed the self-pity to overtake her a moment.

It was all drama class’s fault. They had chosen it as their elective last year thinking it would be easy, and it had ended up being the most difficult experience of Sherlock’s entire life. They’d been given a scene from *Much Ado About Nothing*, unanimously cast as Beatrice and Benedick by their group considering how much they bickered, and that had seemed natural enough, the logical choice. What Sherlock hadn’t counted on was life imitating art, and, somewhere over the weeks of Shakespearean sleepovers and feisty faux flirting, Sherlock had accidentally played out the final act—falling in love.

There was no covert matchmaking involved, of course—although Molly had been in their group with them, and she was smirking fairly often throughout the process—but, then again, it hadn’t really been needed, four years of repressed feelings probably only needing the smallest push to come rushing to the forefront.

Joan had sort of taken Sherlock under her wing when she had started at the school, moved by her parents to avoid the brutal bullying inflicted at the more prestigious academy in the country. Sherlock had been a bit of a mess at first, bitter and snapping at Joan’s every attempt to draw her out of her protective shell, but Joan had been patient, inviting Sherlock to watch her field hockey games or sit with them at lunch. It had been a while before Sherlock accepted, of course, but, once she had, there had been no going back, and now they were inseparable. Or had been, at least.

Sherlock turned, her eyes rolling to the picture on her nightstand, taken after the field hockey tournament Joan’s team had won last year. Joan’s hair was a mess, fraying down from its ponytail and onto her dirt-smeared forehead, but her eyes were bright, glittering blue above a glowing smile. Sherlock, in contrast, was barely smiling at all, a small quirk of her lips that looked more resigned than anything else, but there was a faint flush of pink to her cheeks, hinting at the feeling Sherlock could still remember.

Joan had been warm as she’d slung her arms around Sherlock, rushing straight to her after the game. “We won!” she’d panted. “I can’t believe it; we won!” She had smelled like grass and dirt and spring and sunscreen, and Sherlock hadn’t been able to breathe a moment, caught up in her as literally as she was captured in her arms. Joan had pulled away then, looking over her face like she needed Sherlock to confirm it, and Sherlock had smiled, nodding across the scant distance between them. “Yes,” she had said, “you won,” and Joan had broken into a dazzling grin, snatching her into a hug.
again before Irene had come buzzing around demanding everyone smile.

Stomach fluttering with unwanted butterflies, she snapped her arm up, snatching the top of the picture frame and slamming it facedown onto the table. It didn’t matter, she told herself yet again. Joan might be bisexual, but she clearly wasn’t interested in Sherlock, and, even if she had been, she was leaving. Just like everyone else.

The doorbell rang, and Sherlock shot up, eyes wide as she looked toward her bedroom door. She waited a moment, wondering if it might be a package being delivered, the ringing doorbell more a heads-up than something requiring an answer, but then it rang again, repeatedly and urgent. Sherlock slid off the bed, creeping cautiously down the stairs as she swerved to avoid being seen through the windows, and then tiptoed toward the door, slowly making her way toward the peephole.

“Sherlock!” a familiar voice shouted, and Sherlock started, staggering back from the rattling wood.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock asked, frowning at her, and then her throat went dry as she looked down.

A black leather jacket draped over Joan’s shoulders, hanging down atop a white t-shirt. Her trousers were also black, the pleather shining in the porch light as it clung tightly to every curve of her legs, and she was wearing high heels for possibly the first time Sherlock had ever seen—bright patent red glaring up from the welcome mat. Her mouth was painted in a similar color, her eyes winged and smoked with black, and her hair was scrunchéd in tight curls around her face, the scent of hairspray wafting off her like perfume.

“What’s it look like?” she asked, smirking, and Sherlock blinked, momentarily forgetting her question. Joan turned aside, waving a hand back toward the limo that was parked in the street. “You’re goin’ to the ball, Cinderella.”

Sherlock frowned, mouth moving soundlessly as she looked between Joan and the car. “To the- But, I don’t have-”

“Don’t worry,” Joan said, grinning, and, as Sherlock watched the back door of the limo opened, “I’ve got it covered.”

“Step aside, bitches!” Irene called, the picture of Rizzo as she stomped up the path, arms laden with a worrisome amount of bags and boxes. “Your fairy godmother has arrived!”

Sherlock turned to Joan, wide-eyed with panic, but the blonde just grinned, eyes glowing with pride. “What- What are you-” Sherlock stammered, looking to the brunette, and then broke off with a small yelp as Irene spun her, pushing her back inside.

“Shove it, Sandy,” she said, giving Sherlock’s shoulders a prod every time she tried to turn around. “I’ve got about twenty minutes to work a miracle here.”

“Hey!” Sherlock bleated, Joan’s laugh following them up from the foyer, but Irene just tutted her silent, marching her down the corridor and slamming the door shut behind her.

“Now,” she clipped, dropping her supplies on Sherlock’s bed, “how do you feel about fake
“eyelashes?”

Sherlock gulped.

Eighteen minutes later, Irene keeping a running tally, they were done, Sherlock’s head spinning as Irene twisted her chair toward the mirror. The process had been a whirl of fabric and brushes and curling irons—though, thankfully, no fake eyelashes—and it took Sherlock a moment to be able to focus on her own reflection, and even longer to realize it was still her.

Her lips were painted bright red, a single sharp line of black winging out from her lashes, which looked impossibly long with whatever mascara Irene had probably had to sell a kidney to afford. It had felt like Irene was ripping her scalp off, but Sherlock could now see the actual effect, the front of her hair pulled back into two victory rolls while the rest cascaded in broad curls down her back. She looked down, fingers gripping into the red fabric of her dress, splattered with polka dots and trimmed with black ribbon and buttons on the bodice. A bit of the tulle petticoat protruded from the bottom where it jutted out beneath her antique dressing table, and Sherlock adjusted it, covering the white mesh.

Irene leaned down over her shoulder, peering around the side of her hair as she smirked at Sherlock in the mirror. “Well?” she asked, waving a hand toward the reflection. “Whadya think? I’ll tell ya one thing,” she added with a wink, “I wouldn’t bibbidi-bobiddi-boot you out of bed.”

Sherlock chuckled, soft and breathless as she looked up to Irene’s eyes. “Irene, I—”

“Oh, no,” Irene interjected, flicking a hand down at her, “don’t go getting all sentimental on me. I just asked you how it looked.”

Sherlock smiled, ducking her head to her fingers twisting in her lap a moment. “It looks great,” she assured, nodding back up to Irene, who beamed quite fondly for someone who didn’t want to bring feelings into the mix. “I-I really—”

“Easy now.”

Sherlock laughed, spinning her chair with taps of her black kitten heels against the carpet. “Thank you,” she said, pushing it out before Irene could stop her, and the girl huffed, rolling her eyes as she turned away.

“Allright, let’s go,” she muttered, leaving the detritus on Sherlock’s bed as she swept open the door, “before you start putting that waterproof mascara to the test.”

Sherlock chuckled, rising from the chair and walking out ahead of Irene. Her footsteps clicked on the hardwood as they approached the stairs, and Sherlock stopped, hovering just out of sight around the corner.

Wordlessly, Irene came up to her side, hand gentle on the small of her back, and Sherlock turned, a question on her lips she didn’t know where to start with. Irene smiled, nodding softly at her as she pressed just lightly against the back of her dress, and Sherlock took in a breath, nodding back before starting down the stairs.

Joan was sitting at the bottom of the steps, arms hanging off her elbows as she tapped at her mobile. She didn’t look up right away, Sherlock stepping lightly so as to avoid detection, but, eventually, one of her heels clicked, and Joan turned around. Her blue eyes widened, sliding up in an almost comic pan from Sherlock’s ankles to her hair, her mouth moving soundlessly. “I- You—” she stammered as Sherlock drew down to the step in front of her, Irene weaving down past them, head dropped and
steps silent.

Sherlock wasn’t breathing, fingers twisting into the fabric of her skirt as she waited, face downturned and grey eyes peering up through black lashes.

“You look amazing,” Joan breathed, head shaking dazedly, and Sherlock’s knees almost wilted, her hand twitching out toward the railing just in case.

“Don’t you mean boss?” Sherlock teased, remembering the slang they had looked up when they were making posters to spread around the school, the glitter embedding itself into Sherlock’s skin for days.

Joan smiled, but shook her head. “No,” she whispered, and the mocking atmosphere instantly vanished, Sherlock’s stomach twisting with nerves, “I don’t.”

They stared at one another a moment, Sherlock stunned while Joan just smiled, and then the blonde swept aside, extending an arm. “Come on, Sandy,” she said, bobbing her head to the door, “let’s split.”

Sherlock laughed, but took the arm, the two of them clicking toward the door Irene had already soundlessly slipped through at some point. “How are you walking in those?” Sherlock asked, nodding down to Joan’s heels as they stepped out onto the porch.

“Very carefully,” Joan replied, and Sherlock threw her head back, ending up stumbling herself as they made their way to the limo

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The dance was a huge success, much to Irene’s delight. She had insisted they all clamor into the Cadillac photo booth, wanting all her minions and her protégé—which was apparently Sherlock’s new nickname—in the picture with her, and they had obliged, teetering on one another’s laps and frustrating the photographer as he’d needed to take four to get everyone’s eyes open. Sherlock had been sitting on Joan’s lap, her hair continually getting in the blonde’s mouth, until, eventually, Sherlock had had to hold it aside, sweeping it over her right shoulder as Joan peered up over her left.

They’d then all taken their individual turns in the booth, Irene and Joan pretending to be caught making out, Joan and Sherlock pretending to be crashing the car—Joan driving, of course—and Mike and Joan throwing on sunglasses and just generally pretending to be far too cool for everything, the rest of the group standing beside the photographer and trying to make them crack their straight faces.

The dance floor had been the next target, the mix Joan had come up with blasting around them as they all made a truly horrible attempt at swing dancing. At least three people ended up getting elbowed in the face before they gave up, heading over to the milkshake bar and all getting something different so they could try various combinations. Sherlock ended up switching with Molly entirely, both of them preferring the other’s, and then they hung around the diner tables, the group gradually trickling away as they headed back to the dance floor or to food. Sherlock and Joan had hit up the burger station, sharing a burger but getting their own massive plates of chips, and then Joan had been pulled away, dragged off after Irene for a committee photo.

Sherlock watched after her a while, smiling softly to herself as she watched the blonde get sucked into conversation with one group after enough, nodding graciously as they no doubt offered congratulations on the event. Eventually, however, a lump started to grow in Sherlock’s throat, an asphyxiating affection that she had to get away from, so she grabbed her plate of chips and headed
out the doors at the back of the gym, open to keep the dancers from melting.

The ground crunched beneath her shoes, the gravelly dirt rough and shifting as she walked to the playground across the lawn, used by the lower years during their lunch. Settling down on one of the swings, she placed the paper plate of chips in her lap, wrapping her arms around the cold chains as she tilted her chin up to the stars, swaying back and forth on the tips of her toes.

It was a cool night, but not unbearably so, the breeze a welcome reprieve from the humid heat of the dance, and Sherlock nibbled happily on her remaining chips, clearing the plate before tossing it aside. The music drifted out the doors as she swung, skirt fluttering around her legs with every sweep forward, and she stretched her arms out, leaning back as she watched her shoes meet the stars.

“Thought I’d find you out here.”

She gasped, snapping forward to find Joan smiling up at her, arms crossed where she stood just out of range of Sherlock’s swing. “You did?” Sherlock asked, keeping her knees tucked, tugging on the chains to slow her momentum.

Joan smiled, nodding as she moved to sit on the swing next to Sherlock’s. “You always ran straight to the swings when we had to stay after school. Remember when you made that girl Laura cry?”

“She tried to take my swing.”

“She was 11.”

“Exactly. I was 14; she should have known better.”

Joan laughed, head thrown up to the sky as she leaned back, swaying softly as Sherlock’s swing finally stopped, the two of them sitting side-by-side in the dark. Suddenly, Joan looked up, snapping her eyes to the door. “Oh, I like this one,” she said, chain jangling as she stood, and Sherlock frowned before she realized the song had changed, the notes slowing as they drifted out the door.

Her view was then blocked, Joan moving in front of her swing, a soft smile on her face. “What?” Sherlock asked, and Joan smiled a bit brighter, dropping a hand down toward her. Sherlock’s stomach leapt into her throat, but she quirked an imperious brow to keep up appearances. “You’re serious?”

Joan chuckled, reaching down and snatching her hand off the swing’s chain. “As a heart attack,” she said, pulling Sherlock up to standing as she placed a hand on her waist.

They weren’t standing all that close, room between them to look down and bicker over what exactly the steps were that they had learned at that ballroom dance class they’d taken for Joan’s cousin’s wedding over the summer—Joan having to go as part of the bridal party, and Sherlock having to go because she couldn’t say no to Joan—but it was still unbearably intimate, Sherlock’s hand cradled softly in Joan’s as the blonde led.

Joan was humming softly to herself over the song, and, as Sherlock frowned confusedly up at her, she smiled, her voice growing louder, tone lilting rhythmically over the lyrics. “Oh, I know that the music is fine, like sparkling wine, go and have your fun,” she sang softly, swaying Sherlock along with the rhythm, and Sherlock laughed, eyes down as she kept watch on her feet. “Laugh and sing, but, while we’re apart, don’t give your heart to anyone.”

“You’re terrible,” Sherlock chuckled, shaking her head, and Joan grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes.
“But don't forget who's taking you home, and in whose arms you're gonna be!” she wailed, wrapping an arm around Sherlock’s waist as she turned them suddenly, Sherlock laughing around a startled shout. “So darlin’,” she continued, softer now, “save the last dance for me.”

Sherlock giggled, shaking her head, her free hand coming to rest softly on Joan’s shoulder. Quite suddenly, she shivered, and Joan pulled back, concern in her eyes as her head tilted.

“You cold?” she asked, and Sherlock shrugged, not entirely sure of anything anymore. Joan smiled gently, releasing Sherlock’s hand.

“You don’t have to-” she started, but Joan waved her concern away, peeling her leather jacket off.

She held the black jacket out in front of her, flipping it around as she lifted it over Sherlock’s head, settling it atop her shoulders. “There,” she said, tugging the collar around Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock gripped at the sides of the jacket, keeping her arms free of the sleeves.

“Thanks,” she whispered, smiling shyly up at the blonde, whose hands lingered on the shoulders of the jacket as she smiled back. “And, er-” she stammered, twisting at the leather in her hands, “thank you for-for making me go. Tonight.”

Joan beamed, arms withdrawing back to her sides. “Of course,” she said, tipping her head. “But, I’m curious,” she added, eyes narrowing shrewdly, “why didn’t you wanna go?”

Sherlock shrugged, pulling the jacket up on her shoulders. “I just- I dunno, I guess…I guess I thought it’d be sad.”

“Sad?” Joan half-chuckled, frowning at her. “There’s a milkshake bar!"

Sherlock laughed, nodding down at the ground. “Yeah, I know, I just- It’s the last one, ya know?” she said softly, shrugging a shoulder up at the blonde, whose expression turned suddenly thoughtful. “Everything that happens this year…it’s the last time.”

“Well, yeah, I guess, but…Sherlock, I’m going to uni,” Joan said, brow furrowed, “not off to war.”

“Sort of amounts to the same thing though, doesn’t it?” Sherlock muttered, and Joan just blinked at her.

“No,” she said warily, raising a brow, “not really. I’m not likely to be shot taking midterms.”

“I mean,” Sherlock huffed, exasperated by embarrassment, “that you could go to uni somewhere farther away. Only be back for holidays. Once you’re more than a few hours away,” she murmured, shrugging sheepishly, “it might as well be across an ocean.”

Joan smiled for some strange reason, shaking her head lightly. “Sherlock,” she said, looking up from the tops of her eyes, “that’s not going to happen.”

“It could,” Sherlock countered, and Joan chuckled, placing her hands on the brunette’s upper arms.

“No, it’s not,” she assured, and Sherlock frowned, confused by the certainty. Joan watched her a moment, hesitant, and then dropped her face, biting at her lip. “I- Okay,” she sighed, nodding as if to herself, and her hands slipped down to take Sherlock’s own, her fingers trembling slightly.

“Joan-” Sherlock interjected, concerned, but the blonde cut her off with a shake of her head.

“Just-Just let me get this out?” she pleaded, looking up, a confusing desperation in her eyes.
Sherlock blinked, searching over her face, and then, slowly, she nodded.

Joan took a breath, lips forming a tight circle as she hissed the air out. “I-I’m not going away for uni,” she said, and Sherlock’s eyes widened, but she kept her vow of silence. “I only applied to a few, and they’re all in London, and—” She stalled, and then laughed, nervous puffs of air shaking through her lungs. “You remember that flatshare I was telling you about?” she asked, tentatively lifting her eyes, and Sherlock figured she was allowed to nod. “Well, I went over there the other day. Talked to the landlady, and I- Well, I told her about you.”

Sherlock started with surprise, and Joan’s hands tightened over hers, as if afraid she would bolt otherwise.

“I thought— And maybe it’s crazy, maybe I have completely lost my mind, and I’m definitely skipping a few steps here, but- Sherlock, I-I like you,” she said, voice suddenly small, a self-conscious wince creasing her face as she looked up to Sherlock’s wide eyes. “And I don’t mean- I really like you, more than like you, even, I—“ She stalled, eyes snapping open in horror as her lips froze, and, though she briskly moved on, Sherlock held the unspoken words tight to her chest, a warm glow lodging firmly in her heart. “I can’t afford it on my own,” she said, shaking her head down at the ground, “and I know you have another year left, and it’s farther from school, and it’s really the most inconvenient thing in the entire world, but—”

“Yes,” Sherlock interrupted, one of the syllables screaming through her mind finally making it to her mouth.

Joan snapped her head up, blinking at her, the shifting lights of the dance reflected in streaks across her eyes. “Yes?” she murmured, eyes widening as Sherlock nodded.

“Yes. Live with you, yes,” she spluttered, words tumbling out in an eager rush. “And-And that other bit,” she mumbled, shifting lightly at their intertwined hands as she dropped her face to them, “I- Me too.” She peered up through her lashes, watching as Joan looked between her eyes in disbelief. “I- I like- Yeah.”

Joan smiled, a curl of her mouth that slowly grew to a grin. “Yeah?” she teased, chuckling as Sherlock dipped her flushing face.

“Stop it,” she murmured, nudging at Joan’s arm, and Joan laughed, grieving Sherlock with the loss of her hands until they appeared again at her neck.

Joan probably hadn’t planned it, but the high heels certainly came in handy now, bringing them to almost the same height as Joan’s lips brushed hers. It was a tentative kiss, a press of red-stained lips that tasted like salted chips and the chocolate mint milkshake Joan had concocted, but it was Joan fucking Watson and she smelled like strawberries and hairspray and a faint waft of leather coming up from Sherlock’s shoulders, and, for all its patience, it was perfect.

Joan pressed another brief peck to Sherlock’s bottom lip as she pulled away, her hands sliding down to fidget at Sherlock’s collar. “So—” she mused, lips trembling as if she very dearly wanted to laugh.

“So,” Sherlock echoed, nodding, and then, as their eyes met, they did laugh, Joan’s arms dropping away as she turned toward the swing set while Sherlock lifted a hand to the back of her mouth.

“What did I miss?”

They both turned, still laughing, and watched as Irene teetered on her heels toward them.
“Nothing,” Joan chirped, shrugging, and Irene looked at her skeptically, eyes scanning between the blonde and where Sherlock was still quivering faintly with laughter.

“Your lipstick’s smeared,” she muttered, eyes set on Joan’s mouth, and Sherlock burst into giggles again as Joan sucked her lips in over her teeth. “Come on, lovebirds,” she added, but she was smiling as she turned, “we’re about to start requesting songs, and there’s no way I’m doing Beyoncé without my backup dancers.”

“Backup dancers?” Joan sputtered, but Irene just nodded.

“Yep!” she said, grinning brightly as she beckoned them with an arm. “Now, come on. Destiny’s Child, movin’ out!”

Sherlock laughed, Joan gaping after her, head shaking.

“That woman,” she muttered as Sherlock drew up to her side.

“You’re the one who made a deal with the devil,” Sherlock reminded, tipping her head, and Joan glared up at her. “Looks like it’s time to pay up.”

Joan sighed resignedly, dropping her head to the ground, and then they started forward, heading toward the gymnasium doors.

“Hey, how’s your wrist?” Sherlock asked, frowning thoughtfully down at the blonde, who turned curiously.


Sherlock grinned, slowly lifting an arm. “’CAUSE IF YOU LIKED IT THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE PUT A RING ON IT! IF YOU LIKED IT THEN YOU SHOULD’VE PUT A RING ON IT!” Sherlock sang, twisting her wrist, the words dissolving into laughter as she darted out of Joan’s reach, racing the blonde toward the doors. “DON’T BE MAD ONCE YOU SEE THAT HE WANT IT! IF YOU LIKED IT THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE PUT A RING ON IT!”

Right on cue, Irene appeared, grinning wildly as she leapt out the doors. “WU UH OH!” she cried, pointing dramatically at them, and then grabbed Sherlock’s hand as Sherlock grabbed Joan’s, the three of them laughing their way to the DJ.
Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** John and Sherlock are teens who rake leaves for extra money. Somehow they both get scheduled to rake the same yard (probably Mrs. Hudson couldn't remember she had already scheduled someone to do it, or is secretly trying to play matchmaker). They both get there, argue & bicker over who's going to rake the leaves. They decide on a competition to see who can rake the most. Make two huge piles, argue over their sizes and then end up throwing them at each other and snogging. - monwatson

**Prompt:** I know you don't really like to use it, but can we get a little overcoming homophobia? - anonymous

**Prompt:** A little smutty teenlock certainly wouldn't go amiss. - anonymous

**Prompt:** Maybe you could work in the 'hate (&lust) at first sight thing slowly turning into love - anonymous (Author note: This one is included a little differently than I know you intended, so I'll do a better one for Christmas, I promise!)

I'm telling you right now: This is sad. Not major-character-death sad, because I'm not a monster, but pretty sad.

Chapter Notes

Yes, October is over. No, Johnloctober isn't. There will be 31, don't worry.

Again, I am going to be doing a 25 Days of Christmas thing like this, and you can leave prompts on my tumblr or here.

The house was loud, filled near to bursting with what must have been the entire student body, costumed and half-drunk as they twisted around on the dance floor. Irene Adler’s parties were legendary, the rugby team always making an appearance that lasted hours longer than they’d planned, but John wasn’t much in the mood tonight, in spite of it being the last one of his secondary school career.

The pounding notes gave him a headache, the liquor too thick in his mouth, and he bent down, placing his hand on the small of Mary’s back as the petite blonde fairy turned her glitter-rimmed eyes up to him. “I’m gonna get some air!” he shouted over the music, miming toward the back door with his plastic cup, and she followed his gaze a moment before nodding, moving back toward the group now that her dancing partner was bailing.

John weaved through the crowd, finally able to breathe once he reached the edge of the makeshift dance floor. Turning around to check on Mary one last time, he found her already happily dancing with Ryan Dimmock, one of the newer members of the rugby team, and John smiled, watching the boy blush as he trod on her feet.
They’d ostensibly come to the party together, he and Mary, but they weren’t really dating, in spite of how much everyone said they ought to. Captain of the cheer squad and captain of the rugby team: a match made in heaven, was it not? But they made better friends, in the end, and John couldn’t help rooting for Dimmock as Mary batted his apology away, taking his hand and twirling herself beneath it while she laughed.

He pulled on the handle of the back door, sliding it open and stepping out on the deck, the music mercifully dimming as he pushed the glass closed behind him. With a small sigh of relief, he paced out of view of the party, heading further around the back of the house. His Prince Charming boots thumped heavily on the worn wood, and he looked down at them in useless scolding as he reached one of the small tables that had been set up outside, littered with cups he added his own to. Looking up at the dark sky, he smelled a whiff of cigarette smoke drifting around from the front of the house—the large oak tree always being where the smoke break crowd gathered for some reason—but there were no people around his side at the moment, likely driven inside by the growing chill in the late October air. Checking his watch, he realized it was now technically November, and was just about to go back inside and see if 2am was an acceptable time to make his escape when he heard voices from around the corner to his right.

“Come on, don’t be such a prude!”

“I said no, alright?”

“Yeah, but you always say that to start with.”

“Well, then maybe you should start listening.”

“Geesh, no need to get all bitchy about it; it’ll only take a second.”

“No! I said- Stop! Hey, cut it out!”

John’s hands were clenched into fists, his nails digging into his palms as his throat went dry, head spinning. He knew that voice, the stab of pain it always brought to his chest aching fresh with the sound, but it was wrong to stand here, to do nothing, so he rounded the corner, temporarily ignoring how unwelcome his appearance would be. “Hey!” he barked, staring at the blond man and avoiding the eyes of the brunette, though his heart still pounded at the proximity. “He said no,” John added sternly, and even that, a casual pronoun of a mention, was enough to send his stomach spiraling.

Victor pulled away, painted Frankenstein’s monster scars twisting as he glared. “Fuck off,” he spat, and John folded his arms across his chest. “We’re just fine over here, Your Highness.”

John’s jaw stiffened, eyes narrowing to slits. “Doesn’t look like it to me,” he replied icily, and Victor moved toward him, the brunette relaxing somewhat at the distance.

“Stay out of it, Cap,” Victor snapped, the nickname given to him by his rugby mates popping off the boy’s sneering lips, “or you’ll be spending the rest of the night in the A&E.”

John laughed, bowing his head to the deck. “Oh, Victor,” he sighed, shaking his head at the man as he looked back up, “even if you weren’t completely rat-arsed right now, we both know how that fight would end.” He smiled, tipping his head, and Victor had the good sense to look at least mildly afraid. “Now, why don’t you go back inside,” he suggested, bobbing his head back behind him, “before you say something I’ll make you regret.”

Victor stared at him a moment, hesitation in the twitches of his mouth, and then he huffed, sneering in a frail mask of fear. “Whatever,” he muttered bitterly, though he gave John a wide berth as he
passed, “I can find better anyway.”

John flinched, his fingers digging in hard where they gripped his biceps, but, thankfully, Victor didn’t see, his footsteps thumping away across the wood until they disappeared with a wash of sound, the sliding door opening back to the party before closing with a dull thud.

There was no sound but the faint pounding of the bass and soft rustle of leaves for a moment, John’s heart shaking through his ribs as he breathed down at the deck.

“Are you alright?” he finally asked, voice shockingly soft and shaky as he only managed to get his eyes as far up as the boy’s waist.

The brunette did not reply, pushing off the edge of the house and turning to walk away from John.

“Sherlock,” John called in halt, leaving himself breathless, his mind spinning from the long-lost sensation of rolling the sound off his tongue.

The boy stopped, slowly turning back, and John locked his knees, determined not to faint.

Sherlock looked much the same as ever, and yet so different, different in the subtle ways that only absence makes obvious. His hair, though just as dark, was longer now, the curls unruly atop his pale face, where the cheekbones stood out even starker than John remembered. He had forgone the hat and eye patch befitting his pirate costume, but there was a sword tucked into the belt of his black trousers, leaving no doubt what he was, but John almost wished he had them now, some sort of barrier between his eyes and John’s face. Those hadn’t changed a bit, slate grey glittering across at him in the dim light of the moon, and a chill that had nothing to do with the season ran down John’s spine, something curdling in his stomach at the ice in Sherlock’s gaze.

“Are- Are you alright?” he asked again, frail and wary, and Sherlock’s eyelids fluttered, a twitch more than a blink.

“I’m fine,” he murmured in reply, and, even with his voice barely audible, John’s vision blurred at the sound. “I’m also, incidentally,” he continued, tone sharper now, “perfectly capable of taking care of myself.” He twisted on his heels, moving swiftly away, and, though John didn’t have anything else to say, he knew he didn’t want to stop talking.

“What!” he spluttered, diving forward and snatching Sherlock around the wrist, and the man staggered away as he yanked it back, looking between his arm and John’s face with blatant disgust. “Sorry, I- I’m sorry,” John said, lifting his hands to his shoulders, palms out in entreaty. “I just- You shouldn’t hang around with that guy.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened, lips parting in shock.

“He’s not- He’s just using you,” John continued, and Sherlock laughed, a bitter bark that snapped John to silence.

“Right,” he muttered derisively, turning away again, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I’m serious!” John spouted, moving after him. “He’s not- He’s no good, he-”

“What is this?” Sherlock snapped, rounding back on him. “What are you doing?”

John blinked, mouth fluttering mute. “I- I was just-”

“What, is this part of your costume?” Sherlock demanded, eyes flashing. “Prince Charming
pretending to care about some poor defenseless damsel?”

“I wasn’t pretending, I—”

“Oh, really?” Sherlock scoffed, and John shrank under his sharpening glare. “And when was I supposed to get that impression?”

John opened his mouth, but a shout cut him off, drifting from around the corner as music burst from the sliding door.

“John?” someone who sounded like Mary called, and John leapt back, away from Sherlock and toward the sound.

Sherlock huffed a laugh, and John turned, finding the man shaking his head over John’s shoulder. “Well,” he muttered breathily, dropping his face to the ground, a pained smile pulling at his stiff expression when he lifted it again, “I suppose it’s comforting to see some things never change.”

John winced, looking down at his feet as he swallowed. “Sherlock—”

“Don’t worry,” the man tossed over his shoulder, waving a hand as he started away again, “I’ll walk around this way. Wouldn’t want anyone to see us together.”

Bile rose quick and hot in John’s throat, and he could not reply, could not do anything but watch Sherlock walk away, a familiar tableau he thought he might always be caught in.

“There you are,” Mary sighed, coming up to his side, John now staring off at the empty lawn. “We were just about to start in on shots. Are you alright?” She laid a hand softly on his arm, finally prompting him to look at her. “You’re shaking,” she said, concern etched in her face as she wrapped his hand in both of hers. “Come on, let’s get you inside,” she commanded, not waiting for a response as she began to lead him back to the door. “What were you doing out here anyway?” she asked as they rounded the corner, and John’s eyes caught on a figure walking across the pavement in front of the house, head bowed and coat flaring before they disappeared from view behind the neighbor’s shrubs.

John shook his head, swallowing the knot in his throat. “Nothing,” he croaked, coughing sharply as he pushed up a smile. “Nothing at all.”

---

The last time he had spoken to Sherlock Holmes, they had been fifteen.

They had lived down the street from one another their entire lives, but had never met until Sherlock had switched schools at 10, moving from the prestigious academy in the country and dropping right into John’s year. They had become fast friends, doing everything together, but the story didn’t really begin to end until they were trapped in a tent together during the rainiest spring for decades and the annual science trip two years ago.

He couldn’t remember now exactly how it had started, only that Sherlock had been at his throat about stepping on his leg through his sleeping bag, and John had been insistent that Sherlock had been trying to trip him, but they had ended up shouting awfully close to one another’s faces, and then, suddenly, Sherlock was screaming at him to shut up and John had just kissed him.

Over two years, and John could still remember what it felt like, how shy and stunned Sherlock had been under his lips, how slow he had been to respond. He could remember what he tasted like when he finally did respond—chocolate biscuits and earl grey tea—and John had quickly unzipped
Sherlock’s sleeping bag, pulling the boy across and atop him where he was still lying over his own.

Sherlock had asked him then what they were doing, shaking slightly in the chill where he lay on John’s chest, John carding fingers through his hair as he pressed his lips down the boy’s pale jaw.

‘I don’t know,’ John had whispered in the dark, pulling Sherlock’s sleeping bag over them as the brunette settled in at his side. ‘I don’t know.’

Sherlock hadn’t asked again, not once all that summer.

In June, Sherlock had come over to study, about two months into whatever it was they had, and they’d been studious for an impressive total of 45 minutes before Sherlock was scrabbling at the bottom of John’s shirt, trying to pull it over his head while John refused to stop sucking on his collarbone. That was the first time his hand had moved to Sherlock’s jeans, hovering over the zipper, and Sherlock had blinked up at him from where he lay across John’s bed, eyes dark and lashes fluttering as he nodded.

‘Are you sure?’ John had asked, and Sherlock had grabbed his wrist, kissing him as he pressed John’s hand down atop the hard length caught between them, both of them groaning.

John remembered every sound, every hitched breath and soft gasp that burst from Sherlock’s straining throat as he took him apart in his hand, too distracted to even consider the pressure in his own jeans, but Sherlock had, pushing him back and undoing John’s fastenings while John was still dizzy from finally knowing what color the brunette’s cheeks flushed when he came.

A couple weeks later, John would slide down Sherlock’s heaving chest, biting at the man’s hip before swirling his tongue over the beaded tip of his cock for the first time, and they would find the holes Sherlock’s fingers had dug in the sheets hours later when they went to bed, Sherlock’s house empty for the weekend.

He could remember the taste of Sherlock on his tongue—salt and something that reminded him strongly of coffee—but what he remembered more was the taste of himself in Sherlock’s mouth when John had pulled him up after the insisted-upon reciprocation, grabbing the man by the hair and dragging him roughly to his lips.

It wouldn’t be until July that they’d talk about past partners, talk about precautions, John needing to sit down rather abruptly when Sherlock had said, since neither of them had ever done anything with anyone else, they wouldn’t need to bother with it unless John insisted.

It would take into August to discuss preferences, John blushing horribly while Sherlock threw around terminology like ordering fish and chips, and then, finally, a record hot day they were mercifully inside Sherlock’s house for, he would push Sherlock down on the bed and lift a pale ankle over his shoulder.

It had probably taken forever, but John hadn’t really noticed, trying to balance remembering diagrams and also never forgetting Sherlock’s noises, but then Sherlock had reached down, latching onto his wrist and telling him to get a move on already.

John had chuckled, the sound running dry as he ran the lube over his cock, this suddenly far too real, and Sherlock’s pale fingers had lifted up to his cheek, brushing lightly before tucking John’s sweat-slicked hair behind his ears.

‘I love you,’ he had said, not at all uncertain, not remotely shy, and John still had nightmares about it, waking with a gasp and tears prickling at his eyes.
At the time, however, he’d only tangled his fingers with Sherlock’s, falling down to kiss the man roughly on the mouth as he pushed in, Sherlock gasping against his lips.

For a long moment, they had just hovered there, Sherlock shaking beneath him, but then the brunette had lifted his chin, breathing John’s own name against his mouth, and it had all faded to a blur of moaning and fingernails and teeth grating over red-sucked skin until Sherlock was gasping a stream of syllables John was never certain he’d been completely conscious of.

‘Oh god oh god John I love you I love you I love you JOHN!’

Three days later, his father would look out the window and see John kiss Sherlock goodbye, his house closer to the bus stop than the brunette’s, and he would barrel outside, jaw stiff as he ordered John to get inside and Sherlock to go on home.

John’s lip would still be bleeding when Sherlock climbed the tree and rapped on his window hours later, standard procedure for when the former was grounded and wasn’t supposed to be allowed visitors.

‘What are you doing here?’ John had snapped, voice still raw from fighting not to cry, but Sherlock hadn’t answered, just moved forward and thumbed gently at the cut on John’s face. John had flushed, pushing him away. ‘I fell,’ he’d muttered, and Sherlock had just stared.

‘You don’t have to stay here,’ he had finally said, following when John turned away. ‘You-You can stay with your aunt. Or me! You can stay with me! My parents won’t care, and we won’t have to hide it any-’

‘We?’ John had interjected, a bitter scoff.

Sherlock had simply blinked, tilting his head at him.

‘Sherlock,’ John had continued, swallowing hard, unable to meet the boy’s eyes, ‘there is no- There isn’t a we, alright? This- Us, it’s- We’re not a thing, okay? We’re not together.’

Sherlock hadn’t moved a moment, just staring at him, mouth shifting and agape. ‘Not- Not together?’ he’d finally murmured, chasing after John as the blond moved to brace his palms atop his desk. ‘What are you- What are we then?’ he’d suddenly railed, a shout that had John flicking a terrified glance to the door, but Sherlock had quieted then. ‘If we’re not together, what-’

‘I don’t know!’ John had hissed, holding a hand out as he’d backed away. ‘I don’t know, I- I was confused, I-’

‘Confused?’ Sherlock echoed, voice sharp and strangled. ‘How can you-’

‘I’m not gay, Sherlock!’ John had snarled, wishing the boy would stop following him, would stop pinning him into corners as John tried to get enough distance between them to breathe.

‘So?’ Sherlock had snapped bitterly, and then eased, stepping forward as he bobbed his hands pleadingly in the air between them. ‘I love you,’ he’d whispered, shaking his head, and John’s eyes had burned. ‘I love you, and I-I know you love me too, I know you do, I-’

‘No!’ John had cried, throwing the boy’s hand off where it had settled on his arm, and Sherlock recoiled, eyes wide as John hated himself for putting that fear there. ‘I don’t- I don’t love you,’ he’d said, tight and cold, and Sherlock’s body had crumpled slightly, like he’d been punched in the stomach by something John hadn’t been able to see. John had just watched him a moment, fingers twitching to fix things, but he couldn’t, wasn’t strong enough, so he turned away, eyes on the
ground. ‘You should go,’ he had spat, jaw setting as the carpet blurred.

‘John-‘ Sherlock had creaked, the blurry shadow of him in the periphery of John’s vision shifting closer, but John had backed away, turning his back as he gripped his desk chair.

‘Get out!’ he’d spouted, blinking down at the stained maple, and there had never been such a quiet, such a tight spring of silence coiling around a room.

Finally, a whisper drifted back to him, strangled with tears John couldn’t bear to turn around and see. ‘I thought you were different,’ Sherlock breathed, his voice farther now, ‘but you’re not. You’re just a coward.’

John had winced at the venom, and then turned, a different sort of quiet settling over him now, the prickling gone from his spine.

Sherlock was gone, his exit hidden by a rustle of leaves in the breeze, and, as John moved to the window, he could barely make out a dark silhouette tearing away down the street, coat whirling out behind him as he ran.

John had sank against the wall then, sliding down to draw his knees up and spill hot tears over his jeans, but, in the end, Sherlock had been right.

John Watson was a coward, and, even after his parents’ divorce—his father gone to America on the arm of the woman he’d left them for—he still was.

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“John! John!?”

“Hmm?” John stopped, turning on the dirt road to find a woman waving at him from beneath a tall maple, the ground at her feet littered with its fallen leaves. “Oh, hi, Mrs. Hudson,” he said, pulling his hands out of the pockets of his jacket as the woman approached. “Sorry, I-I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes, well, I noticed that,” the woman teased, smiling up at him as she came to the edge of her lawn, and John smiled sheepishly, ducking his head to the ground. “Anything you want to talk about?” she asked, dipping her head to meet John’s eyes. “No one looks quite that glum without good reason.”

John smiled, meeting the woman’s soft eyes.

Mrs. Hudson had already lived in the house next-door when his family had moved in, bringing over a plate of muffins John had eaten at least half of. She had apparently used to work for the Holmes family when the children had been younger, but had since been released, Sherlock’s parents setting her up with a lovely house just a bit down the street in case she were to ever need anything. She had been there with a sympathetic ear and biscuits after a bad day, and had come to every school event he and Sherlock had been in, even the truly horrible Christmas show when they were 11, and she had become something of an aunt to him over the years, considering she would never suffer being thought of as a grandmother.

“No,” John assured, shaking his head at the woman’s skeptical expression, “I’m fine. Just distracted, I guess. What was it you wanted?”

“Well, it’s silly, really,” the woman answered, biting sheepishly at her lip. “You see, I completely forgot my sister was coming tomorrow, and she’s so fussy, you know? Always pointing out a chip in the paint or the spots on my glassware. Horrible woman, you can imagine what sharing a room with her was like.”
John chuckled, nodding in commiseration.

“So, you see, I’ve got to get the garden raked, but my back”—she paused, stretching her spine as she placed a hand around her hip—“it’s not what it used to be, and I was hoping—Oh,” she said suddenly eyes widening as she looked between him and the road continuing to wind out ahead of them, “but you were probably headed to the bus stop! If you have somewhere to be, please don’t let me keep you; I can call someone else!”

“It’s fine,” John assured, nodding as she narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s just my friends. They wanted to go see a movie, but I’m pleased to get out of it, to be honest.”

“Just your friends?” the woman pressed, and John tilted his head with a frown. “No special girl you’re cancelling on for my sake?” she explained, quirking a brow, and John smiled even as his stomach told him to throw up.

“No,” he answered, hands folding back into his pockets as he shook his head down at the grass, “there isn’t—I haven’t dated anyone for a while.” He looked back up, catching something on Mrs. Hudson’s face, a brief flash of what almost looked like pity, but then it was gone, replaced by her usual bright smile.

“Well, good!” she chirped, clapping him on the arm. “I’d hate to think I was making some poor girl jealous.” She winked, and John laughed, following her up toward the rake leaning against the tree trunk as he sent out an apologetic group text. “I have bags over there,” she said, pointing to a box on the steps up to her porch, “and there’s gloves out back in the shed, if you’d like. There’s a spare rake in there as well, can you go and grab it, dear? I might be able to help a little, at least.”

“Sure,” John agreed, Mrs. Hudson giving him an appreciative tap on the arm as he walked away, and he smiled back at her before striding down the side of her house, ducking into the back garden and heading toward the shed.

It took longer than he’d thought to find the gloves, the shelves cluttered and matted with dirt, but he managed, walking back toward the front as he twisted at cobwebs caught in his hair. “You might wanna set up some traps,” he called as he rounded the corner, rake swinging at his side. “I think you have…mice.” He stopped dead, the ground rolling beneath him as he caught sight of a figure at the bottom of the stairs, his brisk muttering cut off as John appeared.

Sherlock’s eyes widened in surprise, and then his jaw stiffened, expression glazing over as he turned back to Mrs. Hudson, glaring at her in clear suspicion.

“I caught Sherlock passing by too!” Mrs. Hudson sang, beaming, and John warily crept closer, approaching the duo. “Much better for you two to do it, really, I’d just slow you down, and you always made such a good team. Like when you had to play the angels in that Christmas play, remember? Sherlock forgot all his lines, and you just went through the both of yours! Changed the voices and everything!” She laughed, throwing her head back to the sky, and John’s lips were pulled into a nostalgic smile before Sherlock’s brittle reply pressed it flat.

“That was a long time ago,” he muttered, snatching the rake from John’s hand, and John started, recoiling from the sudden movement. Sherlock cast a look over him, a shrewd examination up and down, but John met his eyes steadily this time when they reached back up to his own, no longer afraid.

He wasn’t embarrassed, wasn’t ashamed, as Sherlock had no doubt thought the other night at the party. It was hard standing close to Sherlock, of course, but not because he was afraid of getting caught, and, as Sherlock’s eyes narrowed briefly on his before blinking in confusion, John wondered
if maybe they’d made a tiny step toward progress.

Of course, a literal blink later, Sherlock was gone, twisting away from him and moving back toward the trees, spine stiff and shoulders set.

John sighed, a dull ache throbbing in the pit of his stomach, and he heard Mrs. Hudson’s feet crunch in the leaves as she moved toward him, a gentle hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

She smiled as John turned to her, a wordless encouragement as she patted his arm, and then she too turned away, heading back up the steps and into the house.

John hovered a moment longer, watching as Sherlock began scraping at the leaves beneath the nearly barren branches, and then sighed, clenching his fists a moment with determination as he strode forward.

Sherlock moved away as he approached, John passing him to grab the rake that had been leaning on the tree, and then they set to work, wordlessly choosing separate sides of the tree and working toward the middle.

As they collected the leaves, silent except for the scrape of plastic over grass and crunching foliage, John couldn’t help but steal glances over his shoulder, angling his sweeps just so to be able to lift his eyes and see Sherlock several meters away.

He had seen Sherlock countless times in the past two years—them going to the same school and all—but he had never been quite as aware of his presence as he was now. It hadn’t really changed anything, talking for the first time since at the party, but it felt different now, brought all those feelings rushing back like the first few weeks after the fight.

John hadn’t eaten for two days after it happened, unable to keep anything down, but, by the time school started, he thought he had a handle on it. Of course, that had gone to hell the second he’d seen Sherlock for the first time, and he’d skipped an entire class period hyperventilating in the toilet.

Sherlock, on the other hand, had seemed entirely unaffected. Furious, yes, but not hurt, not broken the way he had been the night it had happened. But, John supposed, it probably didn’t get much worse than that, so it only made sense he’d be better, be healing where John was still falling apart.

Except, it didn’t seem he had healed, didn’t seem anything had healed really, if the tension still thrumming between them the other night at the party was anything to go by.

“What?”

John blinked, only realizing he’d been staring when his eyes focused on Sherlock’s curious face. “Oh, er, nothing.” John muttered, rattling his head, and then quickly ducked back to his task, turning to avoid his blush being seen.

It was crazy, really, that he would still be so affected after all this time. There was no reason for his heart to pound louder every time they inched closer in their progress, no reason for his grip to tighten on the handle of his rake whenever Sherlock bent to remove speared leaves from the spokes, no reason for his throat to tighten around a whimper when one of the leaves got caught in the man’s hair, prompting an adorable upward glare and a flick of pale fingers.

It didn’t make any sense at all for John to still feel this way, to think he had any right to still feel this way, but he did, and, without thinking, he asked an equally inappropriate question.

“Where were you going?”
Sherlock’s raking paused, and he half turned, quirking a brow.

“When Mrs. Hudson grabbed you,” John added, bobbing his head back toward the road, “where were you going.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed a fraction, scanning between John’s. “To the bus stop,” he answered, slow and wary.

“Oh,” John answered, nodding as he made to go back to his work, but he didn’t quite manage. “Why were you going to the bus stop?”

Sherlock, who had gone back to work, stopped again, turning a little more pointedly, exasperation clear in the tilt of his head. “So I could get the bus into town,” he snipped, cold and deliberate, and John looked away, scraping once again at the ground.

“Why were you going into town?” he murmured, and Sherlock hissed out a sigh.

“For lunch,” he answered, and John was forcibly reminded of his Year Two teacher trying to explain to him why they couldn’t have class outside for the twelfth time.

He nodded, turning his back and idly scraping at flecks of red and brown against the grass. “Lunch with Victor?” he asked, and then froze.

Sherlock froze too, though John couldn’t see him, but the shuffling of leaves stopped from his side too. “What?” he asked, ‘t’ clicking as he slowly turned, and John looked around to meet his eyes, grey and glinting like sharpened steel.

“I-It’s just a question,” John muttered, shrugging, and Sherlock straightened, brow furrowing across at him.

“Why do you care?” he snapped, and John turned toward him, rake stretching out with his arm as he shrugged exaggeratedly.

“I don’t care.”

“You sound like you care.”

“Do you want me to care?”

“I don’t care if you care.”

“Well, I don’t care.”

“Good.”

“Great.”

“Glad we got that sorted.”

“Me too.” John spun back around, Sherlock turning back in tandem, his sweeps even where John’s were brisk and frustrated. He bit at the inside of his cheek, fingers tapping on the handle of his rake. “But were you-”

“No.”

“Oh,” John murmured, watching Sherlock’s turned back as it shifted with the motions of his arms,
“okay.”

They worked in silence for a while, almost circling one another as the leaves began to pile up. John, however, apparently determined to get himself murdered and dragged off in a leaf bag, eventually broke the quiet, spinning around and blurting out the question that had haunted him since he’d seen Victor and Sherlock outside those few days ago.

“What are you doing with him?”

Sherlock turned, eyes wide and blinking as he gaped. “What?” he asked, incredulous.

“Victor,” John asserted, stepping closer, “what are you doing with him?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, closing it again before he spoke, all the while his eyelids fluttering in shock. “Are you serious right now?” he spluttered in disbelief, but John only stiffened his jaw.

“I just wanna know,” he clipped, and Sherlock’s mouth dropped open. “I mean, are you, like…dating, or-”

“I think you pretty firmly forfeited the right to ask me that question,” Sherlock bit, eyes narrowed.

John’s chest seized, an internal wince, but he swallowed, barreling on. “I’m just…concerned.”

“Oh, really? I’m touched,” Sherlock crooned, voice rising, a hand lifting to his chest in mocking before he dropped it, rolling his eyes.

John narrowed his eyes, stepping forward. “I’m just saying, he’s been…around.”

“Oh my god!” Sherlock spouted, eyes scanning over John in furious shock. “Is this- Are you giving me a safe sex lecture right now!?”

“No, I-I just wanna know what you’re doing with him!” John railed back. “If you’re not dating, then what-”

“Nothing!” Sherlock shouted, arms flailing to his sides in frustration. “We’re not- It’s nothing, alright!?”

John blinked, frowning. “Well, if it doesn’t mean anything, then why are you-”

“No, that’s not- UGH!” Sherlock threw the rake aside, snarling in frustration as he grated a hand back through his hair. “I don’t mean nothing like we are nothing—although that is also true—I mean-” He sighed, shaking his head at the ground a moment before looking back up to John, who was frozen, afraid to move lest Sherlock make a dive for his throat. “I mean I’m not- I’m not doing anything. With him. We’re not- It’s not- We haven’t done anything.”

John didn’t breathe, his heart slowing in hesitation. “You’re not- But Victor said-”

“Victor likes to run his mouth,” Sherlock interrupted, rattling his head bitterly. “You know that.”

John hadn’t realized just how much wondering had been weighing on him until he knew, a vice finally relaxing from around his chest, and he’d forgotten what it really felt like to be able to breathe. “Oh,” he said, biting his lip to hold in a reflexive smile as he dropped his face.

“Yeah,” Sherlock muttered back, hands sliding awkwardly into the pockets of his dark jeans. “Not that it would be any of your business if I did, but-”
“Why not?”

Sherlock blinked at him, expression puzzled a moment before he huffed a wry laugh. “I think that’s been fairly well established.”

“No, I mean,” John said, laying his own rake down as he moved closer, heart shaking all the way to his fingers, “what if-what if it was my business.” He looked up at Sherlock through his lashes, the paler man tilting his head as he eyed John warily.

“What are you saying?” he asked, almost fearful with quiet.

John opened his mouth, and then closed it, swallowing as he dropped his eyes momentarily to the ground between them. “Sherlock, I-” he began tentatively, stepping forward once more, but Sherlock backed away.

“No,” he croaked, head rattling, his eyes radiating panic, “no, you-you don’t get to do this. You-You do not get to do this!”

“Sherlock, wait!” John cried, chasing after the man as he made to dart back across the garden toward the road. “Sherlock! Will you just talk to me, please!!”

“Why are you doing this!?” Sherlock cried, spinning back around, though he continued to back away from John’s reaching hand. “Why!!”

“I-” John stammered, blinking his eyes between Sherlock’s, grey shimmering with hurt and hate, “I’m sorry, I-”

“No!” Sherlock interjected, and John staggered back as he stepped forward. “I don’t want an apology, I want to know why! Why are you doing this? Why now?!”

“I-I don’t know, I-”

“You never know!” Sherlock interjected, and John jumped. “You think you can just-just do this? Just say something like that after two years and-and what? What do you expect to happen!?!”

“I don’t know, I just-”

“JOHN!!”

“I DON’T KNOW!”

Sherlock blinked at him, temporarily struck mute, and John seized the opportunity, breaths ragged as he ran a hand through his hair.

“I-I don’t know, I just- Things are different now, I’m different now, and I-”

“Well, congratulations on your transformative experience,” Sherlock snapped, sharp and bitter and not remotely sympathetic, “but it’s about two years too late.”

“Dammit, Sherlock!” John cried, chasing after him yet again. “I was fifteen! I was a kid!”

“So was I!” Sherlock bellowed back, turning toward him once again, hand slicing furiously through the air. “That doesn’t mean anything! It doesn’t make you any less accountable!”

“I’m not saying it-”
“Then stop acting like it!” Sherlock held his eyes a moment, flashing with rage, and then his expression crumbled, a helplessness settling over it as his lips trembled over a breath. “You left,” he choked, shaking his head as he swallowed. “Not me. I-I loved you, and you just- You just left,” he added with a stilted shrug. “Just-Just threw me aside. Like I was garbage, like we were garbage. And now you want to…what? Pretend it never happened?”

“No, I- I just-” John stalled, mouth open uselessly as he blinked at the ground.

“What?” Sherlock prompted, and John sighed.

“I just want you to understand,” he said, and he knew it was the wrong thing as soon it passed his lips, Sherlock’s expression hardening instantly.

“Understand?” he echoed coldly. “You want me to understand why you threw me out of your house? Why you never called? Never text? Never sent a fucking smoke signal?”

“Sherlock-” John tried to interject, but Sherlock was far beyond soothing.

“Because I have a hard time understanding that, John,” he snarled, so much bitterness poured into the name, John flinched. “I have a hard time wrapping my head around why someone would supposedly care about me, and then just leave when it stopped being our dirty little secret.”

“That wasn’t-”

“Then what was it, John?” Sherlock demanded, jaw set and arms crossing.

John blinked, mouth fluttering a moment. “I-I don’t-”

“Don’t you dare.”

John sighed, shaking his head off to the side, tongue pressing hard to the inside of his cheek.

“John!” Sherlock urged, arms unfolding as he pushed closer. “Tell me why!”

“Sherlock-”

“Tell me!”

“Because I was scared!” John blurted, and he felt it even now, fear clawing at his throat as he looked into Sherlock’s eyes, but he had to admit it now, for his own sake as much as Sherlock’s. “I-I was scared,” he repeated, shaking his face to the ground. “I was scared of my dad, I was scared of my friends, I-I was scared of you!” he added, throwing a weak hand up in gesture, and Sherlock frowned, brows furrowing. “I-I didn’t know what it was,” John continued, voice creaking as he blinked the moisture back into his eyes. “What I- What I felt, and I- I just-” He swallowed, hanging his head as he closed his eyes, and then took a single deep breath, lifting his chin to resolutely meet Sherlock’s stunned gaze. “You were right,” he said, soft with sincerity as he nodded. “I was a coward. And-And I did love you.” He watched as Sherlock’s eyes widened, a small gasp hissing past the man’s lips as they popped apart, and, this time, when John moved forward, the brunette stayed put. “I did, Sherlock,” he assured, breathless with earnest, and Sherlock blinked his eyes away. “I did, and I-I still-”

Sherlock’s eyes snapped up to his, grey searching through blue as John’s words failed. “Still?” he murmured, and John could at least manage a small nod.

“I- Sherlock, I’m sorry,” he whispered, shaking his head with contrition. “I am so sorry. And I know
it’s not enough, I know it’s just some worthless platitude that doesn’t actually fix anything at all, but I-I really am. I’m sorry, and I-I know I don’t have any right to ask you this, but-but if you can, if you want to, I—" He stopped, searching Sherlock’s face for some indication he was about to be punched, but the man was only staring at him stock-still, his chest not even appearing to breathe. “I’d really like to try this again,” he concluded, and then just watched, waiting with bated breath as life slowly came back to Sherlock’s face.

“I—” Sherlock whispered, and then took a breath, a ragged rattle of his lungs as he blinked his eyes to the ground. “How—How am I supposed to believe you?” he breathed, shaking his head, but John just shook his back.

“You’re not,” he said, and Sherlock frowned. “But,” John continued, moving that final distance closer, that last step before it was undeniably intimate, and he could’ve counted Sherlock’s lashes as he gazed up into them, “I hope you’ll let me prove it.”

Sherlock’s breath hitched, his lips trembling before he closed them, a swallow moving down his throat as he looked away, eyes reflecting the blue of the sky overhead, and John thought it might kill him now, to be refused, to be let down, to finally know what it felt like to be on the other side. “I-I can’t—” Sherlock sighed, shaking his head, and John was seconds away from passing out before he blurted out the rest. “I—I can’t—just pick up where we left off, I-I need—”

“No,” John interrupted, shaking his head, “no, of course! I- I didn’t mean- We’ll take all the time you need,” he assured, and Sherlock, miracle of miracles, smiled softly.

He ducked his head, licking over his lips before pinching at them with his teeth, and then he nodded, lifting his face. “Okay,” he said, barely above a whisper, his smile tremulous, but there.

John’s eyes widened, his lips dropping apart. “You- Okay?” he parroted, because it didn’t seem real, couldn’t possibly be real, but Sherlock’s smile only twitched a bit wider.

“Okay,” he repeated, adding a firmer nod, and then his expression shifted, hardening as he drew back, lifting a finger between them. “But if you ever do anything remotely—”

“I won’t,” John assured, thoughtlessly capturing Sherlock’s hand from between them, cradling it in both of his as he brought Sherlock’s cold fingers to his lips. “I won’t,” he swore into the skin, and Sherlock stared down at him, something like awe in his eyes.

“Oh, boys!”

They pulled apart, John dropping Sherlock’s hand as they turned toward the house.

“I just pulled a batch of muffins out of the oven!” Mrs. Hudson called, waving an oven mitt at them from the steps. “Come and get ‘em while they’re hot!”

John took a moment to steady himself, the appearance of Mrs. Hudson jarring in its normality when it felt like the whole world was a brand new place. “We’re nearly done!” John called back, ignoring Sherlock’s scoff beside him, but Mrs. Hudson just shook her head.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” she dismissed, flicking the floral-patterned mitten. “The leaves aren’t going anywhere. Come and grab yourselves a bite; you’ve earned it!” She then turned, disappearing
back into the house with a squeak and thump of the screen door, and John frowned after her, suspicion growing in the creases of his brow.

“Her sister’s not coming to visit…is she?” John asked, casting a glance up at Sherlock, who was softly shaking his head at the house.

“Clever,” he mused, begrudgingly impressed. “Evil, but clever.”

John laughed, looking up as Sherlock smiled, and then reached across the small gap between them, tangling their fingers before he thought better of it. “Oh, sorry!” he stammered, moving to pull away. “I didn’t mean to-”

“No,” Sherlock interjected, shaking his head, his own grip tightening back against John’s, “it’s- It’s fine. This-This is fine.” He smiled sheepishly, and John couldn’t help it.

He beamed back, Sherlock looked a little perplexed by the shift. “Well, alright then,” he chirped, and Sherlock let out a startled laugh, moving forward with him as John headed toward the house. He sniffed at the air, slowing his stride as they neared. “Is that-”

“Banana chocolate chip,” Sherlock confirmed, nodding before dropping down a soft smile.

It was the only flavor they had ever agreed on, always fighting over the last one if Mrs. Hudson delivered an odd number, and John grinned, the memory burning bright over his heart.

Yes, some time had been lost, and, yes, they had a lot to make up for, he had a lot to make up for, but maybe—though not the way he’d intended—Sherlock had been right. Some things really don’t ever change.

Sherlock looked down at him, wary of the no-doubt manic smile on John’s face. “What?” he asked, and, in answer, John bolted, breaking the contact of their fingers as he tore toward the house. “What are you-”

“I get the one with the most chocolate!” he shouted over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of Sherlock’s expression.

The brunette’s jaw dropped, brow furrowing with affront. “Like hell!” he exclaimed, darting up after him, and, in the end, he won, John tripping on a hidden branch as he laughed.
Sherlock walked up the steps of the townhouse, scanning up the façade. It looked normal enough—a basic white building in a row of basic white buildings, with the regulation black door and silver numbers glittering atop the knocker—but there were small signs of disrepair, small indicators as to the reason he’d been called here. A potted plant sat outside the door, dead and dry in its chipped holder, and the paint was flaking off the black railing that stretched alongside the few steps, rough under his hands as he plucked at the shards. He turned a paint chip over in his hands, making a likely unnecessary mental note that the railing had once been painted red, and then brushed the fragments from his fingers, stepping up and ringing the bell affixed to the doorjamb.

Barely a second later, the owner no doubt waiting on the opposite side for his arrival, locks began shifting, Sherlock counting a total of four before the door flung open.

“Mr. Holmes?” a man asked from the crack of light, one beady brown eye visible beneath a scant smattering of greying hair, and Sherlock scowled down at him.

“Were you expecting anyone else at the precise time you arranged to meet with me?” he snapped, and the sliver of the man’s face blushed.

“I- No, of-of course not. Sorry,” he stammered, shaking his head as he opened the door wider, stepping aside to allow Sherlock in. “I- Would you like some tea?” he muttered, closing the door and fumbling with the locks. “I just put a fresh pot on, and-”

“Mr. Bailey,” Sherlock interjected, plucking his gloves off as he turned, “as desperately lonely as you most clearly are, this is not a social call, so why don’t you spare us both the awkward small talk and tell me why you insisted on making me come all the way to Clapham for your case?”
Ronald Bailey blinked at him, his eyes glistening—allergies, Sherlock suspected. “I- Well, the thing is—”

Suddenly, a sound came from upstairs, the floorboards directly above them creaking as if someone had stepped heel-to-toe across the wood.

Sherlock frowned up at the ceiling, tracing the sound with his eyes across the plaster as footsteps moved overhead, retreating as if walking down a corridor above. “I thought you said you lived alone, Mr. Bailey,” Sherlock mused, dropping his eyes to the man, and then blinked, his brow furrowing.

Mr. Bailey was pale, his breath hitching in fear as his lips trembled, eyes wide and frantic as they scanned over the ceiling. “I-I do,” he creaked out, turning his gaze to Sherlock. “That’s why I called you here, Mr. Holmes,” he explained, stepping forward, his hands outstretched between them in pleading. “I-I didn’t think you’d believe me otherwise, if-if you didn’t see it for yourself.”

“See what?” Sherlock asked warily, foreboding prickling at his veins.

Mr. Bailey swallowed, expression turning grave. “Mr. Holmes,” he said, leaning forward as he dropped his voice to a whisper, “I-I think—” He paused, licking his lips nervously as he cast a glance side-to-side. “I think my house is…haunted.”

Sherlock blinked, the man watching him steadily. “Haunted,” he repeated, eyebrow quirking as Mr. Bailey nodded. He then closed his mouth, scanning up and down the man.

Mr. Bailey was around 53 years old, worked as an accountant or some equally mundane job, had never married, was an avid collector of war memorabilia—which might have been related to the previous deduction, now that he thought about it—and suffered from arthritis in his knees. He did not appear to be unhinged in any way, but one could never be too careful, so Sherlock subtly slid a step back, looking between the man’s eyes.

“Mr. Bailey, are you currently taking any medications?” he asked, and the man sighed, rattling his head down at the carpet.

“I’m not crazy!” he urged, and Sherlock lifted a placating hand.

“I’m not saying you are,” he lied, “but I do have to ask. Any medications at all? Sleep aids, cold medicine?”

Ronald calmed, breathing down at the floor before shaking his head. “No, I- No, nothing.”

“Any change in your routine? Habit you’ve picked up or quit? Even something as simple as a change in your laundry detergent could—”

“No, I’ve checked all that!” the man sputtered, turning on his heels as he paced across the foyer, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Believe me, I did. I even got a CAT scan last month, nothing! Everything is exactly the same as it was when I moved in here two years ago, and then, three months ago…this started!” He waved a hand up at the ceiling, though the upstairs was quiet now. His feet stalled on the carpet, a heavy sigh gusting out of his mouth. “Mr. Holmes, I know it sounds crazy,” he said, looking up, defeat etched in the tired lines of his face, “I know it does. And normally I am the last person to- But I can’t explain it.” He shook his head, casting a wary glance to the stairs. “I’ve had a plumber check the pipes, an exterminator check the walls and attic, anything I could think of, but nothing worked. Not until—” He stopped, dropping his eyes as he bit at his lip.

“Until?” Sherlock prompted, and the man flicked a nervous glance up at him.
“I have a friend,” the man explained, moving to a large wooden cupboard just inside the living room behind him. “She says she’s a- Whadya call them? Sensitives?”

“I have no idea,” Sherlock drawled, and Ron blushed.

“Well, I think that’s what she said. Anyway.” He paused, bending down and pulling a box from one of the shelves. “She said she felt something here. A spirit. So, I- Well, I bought this.” He held the box out toward Sherlock’s hands, and the detective took it, warily lifting the lid to reveal a wooden Ouija board. “I know it’s not the smartest idea,” Ron continued, and it was a good thing he did, because Sherlock was struck rather speechless by the whole thing, “but I didn’t know what else to do. And, the thing is…it worked.”

Sherlock looked up at him, brow furrowed. “It…worked?” he questioned, and Ronald nodded.

“I mean, I didn’t get much,” he admitted with a shrug, “just the odd ‘yes’ or ‘no’ here and there, but the little pointer thing was definitely moving on its own.” He batted down at the box, pure conviction in his eyes, and Sherlock wondered what exactly someone had to be on to be so convinced by a hallucination.

“Well,” he muttered, closing the lid again, “that is certainly…something.”

Mr. Bailey smiled softly, his eyes turning down. “I know you don’t believe me,” he said, shuffling his feet in the carpet. “I didn’t really expect you to, to be honest, but- Well, I read your website.” He stepped forward, looking up at Sherlock with a helpless desperation that would probably be moving if Sherlock could be moved. “If anyone can figure out what’s going on here, Mr. Holmes, it’s you. And if you, of all people, tell me I’m crazy…” He trailed away, sighing down at the floor before flopping his arms in an exaggerated shrug. “Well then, I guess I must be. I just want to know what’s going on in my house, Mr. Holmes,” he said, and he looked so tired, suddenly a much older man standing in the yellow light of the chandelier. “I just want to know.”

Sherlock hesitated, fingers shifting on the edge of the box in his hands. He could leave, of course, turn down the case and return to Baker Street to continue his tobacco ash analysis, but his bank account was running a bit lower than he would’ve liked, and he didn’t want to have to pretend he didn’t notice Mycroft top it up again. That was just getting embarrassing for the both of them.

Just then, there was another thump from upstairs, like something falling and then rolling a small distance, and both men’s eyes snapped back to the ceiling.

“It’s probably just a rat or something,” Sherlock stated, confident that, whatever it was, he wouldn’t need a Ouija board to communicate with it, “but…I suppose I could-”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Holmes!” Ronald urged, and there was a terrifying moment Sherlock thought he was going to hug him before he shifted the box pointedly between them to block the man’s path. “You’ve no idea, I- My study seems to be the most active room,” the man explained, waving a hand up the stairway. “That’s where I got it to communicate with me before. It’s the room at the end of the corridor, the one directly above us right now.”

Sherlock nodded, preferring to commune with the beyond if the alternative was continuing this conversation. “Thank you,” he pushed out, forcing a small smile as he headed toward the stairs. “I’ll just-”

“Oh yes, of course, of course,” the man spluttered, waving his hands for Sherlock to go ahead. “And thank you again, Mr. Holmes, thank you so much!”
“Yes, your gratitude has been quite adequately conveyed, Mr. Bailey,” Sherlock muttered, and Ron blushed before retreating, disappearing into what Sherlock suspected was the kitchen as Sherlock headed up the stairs.

The steps creaked, because of course they did, but the rest of the townhome seemed fairly normal. On his way to the study, he passed a bedroom and a bathroom, both of which appeared to be perfectly in order. Mr. Bailey clearly valued cleanliness and organization, and his study was a glowing testament to that fact, everything laid out in pristine piles and the books stretching across the shelves in height order. The furnishings were dark wood and brown leather, a large glass display cabinet holding a collection of antique guns pressed against the wall. There was an ornate lamp perched on the corner of the man’s desk, and, as Sherlock flicked it on, the light caught on an elaborate plaque that was most likely a gift for some milestone achievement in not being fired. Leaning closer, he could make out the engraving on the gold—*In recognition of 25 years, and in hopes of many more.*

Sherlock huffed a faint laugh, placing the Ouija board box on a leather armchair that sat near the window before getting to work. He knocked on the walls, testing for hollow spots and scuttling rodents, as well as shouting down to Mr. Bailey whenever the man panicked at the sound. He ran his hand along the wallpaper, looking for seams that might reveal a door or a crack to the outside, but there was nothing, and he was rather disappointed at that one. Finding a secret passage might just have made this trip worthwhile.

He stood in the center of the room, frowning to himself, and was just about to do another round of knocking on the walls when the desk lamp went out with a small click, like someone had pulled the dangling cord. The overhead light was still on, however, eliminating the possibility of a power outage, so Sherlock crept closer, frowning as he followed the wire of the lamp. Confirming it was still plugged in, he then turned his attention once more to the lamp itself, gripping the metal pull to test if it were simply loose. The cord was uncommonly cold to the touch, and Sherlock turned it over in his hands, testing the phenomenon before clicking the light back on again, blinking at the sudden assault on his eyes.

He straightened up, and then spun, catching sight of a shadow in the corner of his eye. He saw only bare bookshelves, however, no sign of the figure he was sure he had seen, but something still pricked at the back of his neck, an instinctive awareness that he was being watched. Sherlock relied on evidence first and foremost, but he wouldn’t have stayed alive as long as he had in this business without listening to his instincts, so it was with increased caution that he headed toward a wardrobe against the wall, wondering if someone had perhaps quickly darted inside. He drew up alongside it, stretching his arm out to the handle, and then quickly flung the door open, rounding it to catch whoever it was red-handed. But there was no one there, just the bare inside of a wardrobe staring back at him, and he hummed musingly to himself as he closed it, face creased in a thoughtful frown.

“Not in the closet, then,” he murmured, moving back toward Mr. Bailey’s desk, but his eyes caught on a picture on one of the shelves, and he chuckled to himself, leaning up toward it. “Unlike dear old Ronald,” he muttered, looking at the man standing beside Ron in the photo, clearly a lover from his university days that he never fully acknowledged.

Something shifted in the room behind him, and Sherlock spun, eyes wide and hands lifting defensively, but there was no one there, the room exactly the way it had been, except…had that box moved?

Cautiously, Sherlock stepped forward, approaching the Ouija board box. His fingers curled and uncurled several times in hesitation as he outstretched his hand, and then, finally, he flipped the lid off, peering down at the board inside.
The planchette was settled over ‘yes’, and Sherlock frowned, tilting his head, certain he had felt it shift into the corner as he’d been carrying it.

Moving his hand to the pillow beneath the box, he pushed on it lightly, testing the buoyancy. “Must’ve slid down,” he mused to himself, and then leapt back, eyes gaping wide as a scraping sound came from his left.

The planchette was moving, shifting even as his eyes tracked in, and finally settled across the board at ‘no’, Sherlock never blinking all the while.

He swallowed, commanding his heart to stop pounding as his fingers twitched in and out of anxious fists. “Right then,” he clipped, giving himself a brisk nod, “I’ve clearly been drugged.”

The pointer moved again, shifting off of ‘no’ a moment before moving back on, and Sherlock’s lips popped apart before he collected himself, remembering he was a scientist.

With only a small amount of hesitation, he stepped forward, removing the wooden board from the box. The planchette slid easily atop the surface, nearly falling off the side before Sherlock caught it, and then proceeded to turn the board over in his hands, tapping at it here and there. Crossing over to the desk, he placed the Ouija board on the surface, sitting the pointer in the corner as he plucked a paperclip from an open box beside a stack of papers. “Must be magnetized,” he said, beginning to graze the paperclip over the surface, and then barely stifled a cry as the planchette raced past his hand, settling once more on ‘no’. “Stop that!” he barked at apparently no one, and the pointer moved again, repeating the previous movement of leaving and returning to ‘no’. Sherlock glared down at the board, the only outlet for his anger, and then snatched the planchette up, stowing it away in his pocket with a frustrated huff. “There,” he sniffed superiorly, “now let’s see you-“

The room was plunged into darkness, and Sherlock froze, standing stock-still in the middle of a room now lit only by the faint hint of streetlamps peering in around the curtains.

He wasn’t afraid, of course, there obviously being a perfectly rational explanation for why the study had gone dark while the light from the foyer was still stretching up the stairs in the corridor beyond, but he still jumped as the scraping sound returned, the pointer once again sliding across the board in front of him. “What the-” he breathed, batting at his pockets, but the planchette was no longer there, though he was positive he had taken it.

That mental breakdown would have to wait, however, as the pointer was now darting back and forth across the Ouija board, twirling across the letters before pausing over certain ones.

Curiosity overtaking the fear he most certainly didn’t have, Sherlock stepped forward, frowning in focus as he murmured over the letters in time with the pointer. “W-H-O-Y-A-G-O-N-N-A-C-A-L-L,” he spelt, following along with the planchette, and then tilted his head, perplexed. “Who ya gonna call?” he muttered, rattling his head in confusion.

“Seriously?”

Sherlock gasped, spinning around at the voice.

“Ghostbusters?” the man said again, and Sherlock’s eyes widened, settling on the figure leaning against the doorjamb. “Honestly, even *I* know that one, and I’m dead!”

Sherlock was dreaming, he had to be. Dreaming or drunk or drugged or *something*, but he could not possibly be seeing a *ghost* right now!

Whatever the reason, a man stood in the doorway, ankles and arms crossed as he leaned against the
wood. He almost looked real, almost, but there was something just a touch transparent about him, a sort of mist to his edges that made it clear he wasn’t entirely corporeal. He was a bit older than Sherlock, and wearing an army uniform, circa WWI, with colors striping across the chest and a band wrapped around his upper arm denoting him as a medic. His skin appeared to be quite tanned, his hair blond, and his eyes shone a bright blue as they looked directly into Sherlock’s, slowly frowning as he considered him.

Sherlock just blinked, lips parted, his lungs no longer seeming to need air anymore as he froze, and yet, he couldn’t say he was afraid. Maybe it was because none of it was real, but Sherlock knew instinctively he wasn’t in any danger, wasn’t under any sort of threat, and, as the man moved, straightening up as he continued to look over Sherlock, he felt no impulse to flee.

“Wait, can you- Can you see me?” the man asked, taking a tentative step forward as he waved a hand side-to-side in front of him, his eyes widening as Sherlock unconsciously followed the movement. His arm fell to his side, his expression likely mirroring Sherlock’s as he looked over him, stunned, and that more than anything eased Sherlock enough to talk.

“Why are you surprised?” he asked, and the man startled, shoulders jerking in a spasm.

“You can- You can hear me!” the man sputtered, voice slowing as it grew louder, his hand tapping to his chest.

Sherlock quirked a brow. “Well, you don’t have to shout,” he muttered, and the man’s face quickly shifted from startled into a glare. “So?” Sherlock prompted, and the specter tilted its head. “Why are you surprised?”

“Oh,” the man murmured, ambling further into the room. “Well, no one ever has before. Been able to see me, I mean.” He shrugged, and then looked back up at Sherlock speculatively. “Why aren’t you afraid?” he asked, and it was Sherlock’s turn to shrug.

“I’m fairly certain I’m hallucinating,” he replied, and the man chuckled, a soft sound that made Sherlock’s lips twitch up in reflexive response.

“Well, it probably doesn’t mean much coming from me,” the blond replied, waving a hand in front of his chest, “but you’re not hallucinating.” He smiled, tipping his head, a sort of gentle sadness in his eyes.

Sherlock smiled, wondering where his body was right now, wondering if he was dead, perhaps lying in a coma somewhere. Had Ronald murdered him? He hadn’t seemed the type, but, hey, you never could tell with people.

“John.”

“Hmm?” Sherlock hummed, looking up, and the figment of his imagination smiled.

“Captain John Watson,” he added, dipping his head. “Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. Can’t tell you exactly when I died, I’m afraid, that bit’s a little fuzzy,” he continued with a shrug, “but it was around October, 1917. We were in Belgium.”

Sherlock blinked at him, and John ducked his head to ground, shuffling a boot soundlessly across the carpet.

“You’ll want to check, I assume,” he replied, hands slipping into his pockets. “Whether or not I’m a hallucination.”
“You could still be a hallucination,” Sherlock countered, and John laughed.

“I suppose,” he admitted. “Depends how much you know about World War I.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked, and John chuckled.

“Well,” he chirped, rolling a hand through the air, “if I’m a hallucination, and I give you the name of a World War I soldier, then, somehow, you must have already known it.” He smirked, crossing his arms. “So, Mr. Holmes,” he said with a smug tilt of his head, “how’s your national history?”

Sherlock hesitated a moment, hating the logic of the argument he was ostensibly getting from a ghost. “It could…probably do with some improvement,” he muttered, and John grinned.

“Well, then,” he answered with a flick of his brows, “I suggest you get thee to a library.” A second later, he was gone, fading away ‘til only the scene behind him remained.

“Wait!” Sherlock called out, uncomfortable not getting the last word, even if it was a conversation with a ghost. “Did you just…Shakespeare me?” he sputtered, and, so faint it might as well have been a breath of wind, a chuckle rippled through the air, the now-familiar grating sound coming from behind him, and Sherlock turned to find the planchette settled over ‘yes’. In spite of himself, Sherlock smiled, shaking his head as he puffed a faint laugh. “Well, alright then,” he muttered, and then moved toward the door, quite ready to call it a night. He paused, however, hovering in the doorway. “It’s Sherlock, by the way,” he spoke to the empty room, dropping his voice so his lunacy wouldn’t carry downstairs. “Sherlock Holmes. In case you were, er…wondering.” There was no reply, and, after a moment, he cleared his throat, moving down the corridor to the steps, where Mr. Bailey was waiting for him in the foyer.

“Well?” the man pressed, eyes wide and urgent. “What happened? Did you find anything?”

Sherlock hesitated, casting a glance up at the darkened stairway. “I- I’m not quite sure,” he murmured, and Mr. Bailey puffed out a breath of relief.

“But you did see something?” he urged. “I’m not crazy?”

Unbidden, John’s laugh floated across Sherlock’s mind, the glint in his blue eyes, and he found himself shaking his head. “No, Mr. Bailey,” he replied, and Ron looked like he might cry, “you’re not crazy. I’ll need to investigate further before I can give you any definitive answers, however,” he added briskly, hoping to cut off any emotional displays.

“Of course, of course,” the man agreed, nodding so fast, his wispy hair bobbed with it, “whatever you need. I’m here every evening, so, whenever you want to stop by.”

Leaving that wealth of mocking fodder alone, Sherlock simply nodded. “I’ll be in touch, Mr. Bailey,” he said, extending a hand, and the man took it, gripping it in both of his.

“Thank you, Mr. Holmes,” he gushed, the hair on the back of Sherlock’s neck rising in trepidation at the man’s watery tone. “Truly, thank you. I don’t know what I would have—”

“Yes, alright,” Sherlock broke off, slipping his hand away and quickly flipping open the locks. “Only doing my job. I’ll text you when I can come over again. Goodnight,” he clipped, and then flung himself onto the porch, Mr. Bailey’s matching sentiment cut off by the click of the wood.

With a huff of relief, Sherlock flipped at the collar of his coat, turning and leaping down the steps onto the pavement. As he walked away, he felt that familiar tingle on his spine, and whirled around, eyes instantly alighting on the window of Mr. Bailey’s study. There was no one there, of course, but
Sherlock was still somehow sure there was, and he smiled softly as he started down the street, pulling out his mobile and pressing a speed dial key.

“Sherlock, do you have any idea what—”

“I need you to look up someone in the archives,” Sherlock interjected, cutting off Mycroft’s tired sputtering. “World War I soldier, died around October of 1917. Captain John Watson.”

Mycroft sighed exasperatedly, but Sherlock could hear the sound of him sitting up, a slight rustling crackling over the line. “And why on earth would you need that?”

“It’s for a case,” Sherlock replied, fingers twitching on the plastic casing of the phone, and he could hear Mycroft’s suspicion in the silence.

“Sherlock, what are you—”

“Can you do it or not?” Sherlock snarled, and Mycroft sighed again, prompting a roll of grey eyes.

“I’ll check tomorrow,” he agreed, “but, Sherlock, you really should—”

“Woops, gotta go!” he chirped, happily hanging up on Mycroft’s shout, and his smile held all the way back to Baker Street.

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“Your move.”

“What?”

Sherlock gestured over the chess board on the floor between them, and John looked down, frowning over the surface.

With a flick of his hand, a rook moved, sliding across and knocking over one of Sherlock’s pawns, and Sherlock gathered it up, moving it to the cemetery of white on his left.

He’d visited several times since their first encounter, finally accepting the improbable fact that John was, in fact, real, Mycroft having found records of his death exactly as John had stated them. It was odd, knowing so much about him without knowing him at all, but they were picking away at that more and more with every visit, talking over games of chess that John insisted Sherlock let him win. And, of course, Sherlock let him think that, the fact that he was genuinely losing much more humiliating. He blamed it on his inability to think ahead, which was probably also to blame for what next came out of his mouth.

“What did it feel like?” he asked, and John blinked his eyes up to him. “Dying,” Sherlock clarified, only mildly embarrassed by his candor, but John only smiled, patient as ever with Sherlock incessant questions.

“It— Well, you know how people say it’s like falling asleep?” John began, tilting his head, and Sherlock nodded. “It’s not,” he continued with a sad twist of his lips. “I don’t remember any lights or harps or anything like that. It was just— One minute I was tying a tourniquet, and the next— Well, it hurt.” He swallowed, rolling his left shoulder, a telling twitch. “There’s no rosy way to put it; it hurt. And there was a lot of screaming, and—and then I was back home.” He smiled, his eyes unfocused across at the wall. “My grandma—she had died a few years earlier—was there, and—and she told me I could go. That I could be at peace or whatever, I don’t remember exactly, but I—I didn’t want that,” he said softly, shaking his head. “My dad was gone, and it was just my mum and sister. I—I thought
that I could…help them somehow, ya know? If I stayed.” He puffed a frail laugh, shaking his head down at the ground as his fingers tugged at the trousers over his crossed legs. “Of course, I couldn’t,” he muttered, shrugging, “and, by the time I figured that out-” He sighed, biting at his lip as he looked once again out at the room.

“Could you leave?” Sherlock asked, uncertain quite why the question left a bitter taste in his mouth. “Now, if you wanted to? Could you…go into the light?” he muttered, waving a hand in mystic mock, and John chuckled, looking back to him.

“I don’t know,” he answered, frowning in thought. “I think so. I think I probably could whenever I want, but- Well, there’s always something to do.” He laughed, leaning back to brace himself up on his palms, and he looked so normal, so human, Sherlock could almost imagine he was, could almost believe he was just sitting on the floor of John’s study playing chess. “I suppose I just got curious, ya know? Watching people, watching the whole world grow up around me. Plus, the longer I stay,” he added, smirking as he lifted a hand, and the curtains behind Sherlock blew open, letting in the afternoon sun, “the better I get at that.”

Sherlock laughed, and John joined in, the sound dancing along with the dust in the beams of light. “How- How do you do that?” Sherlock asked, and John smirked.

“What, you can’t figure it out?” he teased, and Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Big master detective can’t figure out a little old ghost?”

“Are you done?” Sherlock snapped, and John laughed.

“I honestly don’t know,” the blond answered, shrugging. “I just…want it. I don’t know, it’s difficult to explain. I couldn’t always do it,” he continued, rolling a hand through the air. “I would try and knock things off shelves and whatnot, trying to get my mum’s attention, but I could never do it. And then, one day, I just…did. Knocked a vase clear off the table.” He mimed the flight with his hand, smiling, but Sherlock didn’t, seeing the unspoken melancholy beneath. “It scared her,” he said softly, eyes growing distant. “I-I didn’t- I never mean to,” he murmured, shaking his head, “I just- Well, it’s nice to be noticed.” He smiled frailly, and Sherlock just barely managed to return the gesture.

“Can you ever…touch things?” he asked, moving his own fingers in the air in gesture. “Like…properly?”

“Sometimes,” John replied, leaning over his knees. “It takes a lot of energy though, and I have to really want to.”

Sherlock nodded thoughtfully, cataloging every bit of data he could. “What about moving around?” he continued, and John frowned. “I mean, do you have to stay here? In the house?”

John shook his head. “No, I can go out, at least a little ways. I didn’t used to be here at all,” he explained, shrugging a shoulder. “I was home at first, stayed there until the place got torn down, and then, ever since, I’ve just been following my gun.”

“Your gun?” Sherlock asked, and John nodded, bobbing his head toward the display case.

“Third one up,” he said, and Sherlock nodded, finding the weapon behind the glass. “It’s funny,” John continued, smiling at the case, “I’ve seen more of the world dead than I ever did alive.”

Sherlock didn’t particularly see the humor, but, thankfully, John just barreled on, eliminating the need for him to reply.

“It’s been to auction houses, a few different museums and collectors,” he explained, waving a hand
through the air. “I can go a certain distance away, but it gets harder and harder the farther I go, and, eventually, I just sort of…disappear. End up back here.” He shrugged, as if this were perfectly commonplace, and Sherlock was hit once again with a rude reminder of just how not-normal this relationship truly was.

“So, if the gun weren’t here…”

“I wouldn’t be either,” John finished, nodding. “I’m sort of…bound to it, I suppose you could say. I don’t know what’s going to happen when it’s gone.”

“What do you mean ‘gone’?” Sherlock asked, his heart picking up with panic, but John just shrugged.

“You know, deteriorates. Gets melted down. Whatever ends up happening.”

“But-But it’s an antique!” Sherlock spluttered, and John quirked an eyebrow at him, confused. “Surely they wouldn’t- It’s a historical artifact, it-”

“Everything outlives its usefulness, Sherlock,” John said gently, and Sherlock was suddenly a kid again, his mother explaining to him why his father wouldn’t get up, why he should say whatever he needed to now.

And he fought it now, just as he had then. “But it- It’s not- What if you got attached to something else?”

John blinked, tilting his head at him. “Something- What do you mean?”

“Like…if you were bound to something else, if you could switch it. That way, you’d never have to die.”

John’s eyebrows lifted. “Sherlock, I hate to break it to you, but I kind of jumped the gun on that whole dying thing.”

“No, that’s not-” Sherlock began to argue, and then paused, blinking as John’s words sank in. “Did you just-” he muttered, and then glared at John’s growing smirk.

“What?” he chirped, and Sherlock shifted to a glower.

“You can’t pun your own death,” he snapped, and John lifted his hands in an elaborate shrug.

“Why not?” he countered, his smile bright and smug. “It’s my death.”

“It’s offensive.”

“Wow, you sure do shoot from the hip.”

“John.”

“A real pistol.”

“Seriously?”

“It was a shot in the dark.”

“Okay, now this is just getting desperate.”
“I’ll bite the bullet.”

“John!”

“What, ya gun-shy?”

“John!”

John laughed, his merriment only increasing as Sherlock’s glare darkened. “Sherlock, I’m dead, alright?” he chuckled, shaking his head fondly. “I have precious little to entertain me. Weasley there jumps every time I change the channel.”

“Weasley?” Sherlock questioned, and John blinked at him, perplexed.

“Seriously!?” he spluttered, and then sighed, exasperated. “How is it possible I know more about popular culture than you do? How!?”

“I-I don’t get out much,” Sherlock suggested, and John scoffed.

“Well, clearly,” he muttered, waving a hand over their chess board. “You’re playing chess with a dead guy on a Saturday afternoon.”

“I’m out though,” Sherlock countered, lifting a finger, and John just smiled at him, fondly shaking his head.

Just then, Sherlock’s mobile went off, and he fished around in his pockets, John peering curiously across.

“Lestrade?” he asked, Sherlock having explained his occupation several meetings ago, and he nodded, tapping open the message on the screen.

“He has a case,” he explained, turning the mobile so John could read it. “Looks like a mob hit. He’s offered to just send me pictures if I don’t want to get involved.” He looked up at John, and John looked across at him, and then, in the same second, they snorted. “I’ll tell Mr. Bailey I’ll have to come back tomorrow,” he said, hastily collecting the chess pieces and stowing them back in the box.

“Yeah, what does he think you’re doing up here, anyway?” John asked, rising to standing much more smoothly than Sherlock. “Aren’t you supposed to be getting rid of me or something? He had some woman in here with sage before you, chanting some nonsense.” He waved a dismissive hand through the air, and Sherlock chuckled, plucking his coat up from the chair.

“Supposedly, I am very slowly gleaning information through that thing,” he answered, flicking a hand toward the Ouija board, and then paused, his eyes alighting on the display case beyond it.

“How do you feel about relocating?”

Sherlock turned to him, and John instantly looked wary, eyes scanning over his smiling face. “How do you feel about relocating?”

John eyed him suspiciously a moment, but Sherlock darted past him as his mouth opened.

“Mr. Bailey!?” he called, feigning excitement, and John blinked, clearly alarmed at the shift.

“What?” Ron replied, stumbling up the steps, though he stopped short of coming into the room.
“I’ve figured out why the ghost is here!” Sherlock urged, waving the man into the study, and, hesitantly, Mr. Bailey complied. “It’s the spirit of a soldier,” Sherlock explained, fighting not to look to the side, where John was crossing his arms, eyebrow rising imperiously. “He died on the battlefield during World War I.” Sherlock lowered his voice, going as dramatic as possible, and John snorted, shaking his head. “Horribly painful. Blood everywhere.”

“That’s just mean,” John muttered, waving a hand toward the blanching Mr. Bailey, but Sherlock ignored him.

“He died in such torment,” Sherlock continued over John tutting disapprovingly, “that his soul is cursed to forever walk the Earth, bound to his last remaining possession, misfortune following wherever it goes!”

“Okay, now that’s offensive,” John snapped, and, as Mr. Bailey cast a fearful glance around the room, Sherlock snuck a glare at the blond.

“What is it?” Mr. Bailey asked, beady eyes scanning aimlessly. “What the possession?”

Sherlock paused, eyes looking side-to-side for dramatic effect.

“Oh, for chrissake,” John muttered, exasperated, and Sherlock swirled, pointing grandly to the display case.

“His gun!” he announced, and John broke into slow mocking applause. Sherlock ignored him, bustling past and tapping at the glass, Mr. Bailey scuttling along in his wake. “That one,” Sherlock directed, tapping over John’s weapon, and he felt John draw up beside him, a tingling sort of chill running down his left side.

“What do I do?” Mr. Bailey asked, fingers twisting in front of him. “If I- If I get rid of it, will it-will he—”

“Thank you,” John interjected with a nod.

“-go with it? Will he leave?” Ron looked between Sherlock and the glass, and Sherlock put on a grave expression, brow creasing in thought.

“I believe so,” he finally said, and Ronald wilted with a gust of relief.

“You’re a monster,” John muttered behind him, though it sounded almost fond, and Sherlock barely contained a twitch of his lips.

“Oh, thank god!” Mr. Bailey breathed, pulling open a drawer of his desk to remove the key. “I-I can’t thank you enough, Mr. Holmes. Really, I—”

“You can thank me enough, actually,” Sherlock interrupted, and John glared at him in scolding. Not without effort, Sherlock hitched up a smile. “I was only doing my job, Mr. Bailey,” Sherlock continued, casting a pointed look at John, who nodded approvingly. “Just knowing you can live in peace is thanks enough.”

“Here come the waterworks!” John mocked, batting a hand in a breeze up at his eyes, and Sherlock sneered at him across Mr. Bailey’s back as the man removed the pistol.

“What are you going to do with it?” he asked as he handed it to Sherlock, who quickly pocketed it, John’s expression pinching with concern as he followed the movement.
“I know someone who can dispose of it properly,” Sherlock assured, nodding sagely. “They’ll make sure his soul is at rest.”

Mr. Bailey smiled, his eyes doing that extra-watery thing again, and Sherlock quickly retreated back around the other side of the desk.

“I shouldn’t delay, though,” he muttered, nearly tripping over the chess box as he backed toward the door. “These, er, spirits, they-they can tend to get angry if-if they realize you’re going to send them to the, er…beyond.”

“Wow,” John deadpanned, and Sherlock physically had to bite his tongue.

“Oh, yes, yes,” Mr. Bailey insisted, as if he had infinite wisdom on the subject. “Well, thank you again, Mr. Holmes. I-I suppose I’ll just…mail you a check?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Sherlock clipped, making his way now down the corridor. “And, er, let me know if you have any further problems.”

“Oh, I don’t think I will,” Ron replied merrily, hands on his hips as he scanned around his office. “I can feel it already, a real shift in the air. I think he’s really gone!”

John, who was still standing next to the man, whipped his head around, incredulous. “Really!?” he spluttered, shaking his head wonderingly, and Sherlock coughed. John rolled his eyes, but did follow out the door. “Later, Ron,” he muttered, waving a hand behind him. “Good luck with the new boyfriend. And the premium membership after you figure out he’s stealing from you.”

“Yep!” Sherlock chirped, smiling in a way he hoped conveyed he was going to be researching ways to re-kill someone. “I’m sure he’s gone for good!”

“Alright, alright,” John murmured, lifting his hands in defeat as he passed Sherlock, heading down the stairs ahead of him. “I’m going.”

“Bye, Mr. Holmes!” Mr. Bailey called, waving rather theatrically, clearly a little high on his faux liberation. “And thanks-”

“Again, yep!” Sherlock shouted back, tipping his mouth over his shoulder as he barreled down the steps. “Goodbye!”

John was waiting for him on the pavement when he burst out the door, tugging it shut behind him with a nearly thunderous bang. “You wanna try that again?” the blond muttered, waving a hand at the house. “The walls are still standing.”

Sherlock sneered, laughing tonelessly as he drew up beside him, and John grinned, falling into stride at his arm.

“So,” John said, turning his face up toward him, “where’s this body of yours?”

“Islington,” Sherlock answered, pulling the photographs back up on his mobile. “We’ll head up to the main street and then grab a cab.”

John nodded, and then suddenly snorted.

“What?” Sherlock asked, turning to find the man laughing.

“Nothing,” he chuckled, shaking his head, “it’s just- Well, you do realize you look like a crazy
person, right? Walking down the street talking to yourself?"

“I’m not talking to myself,” Sherlock replied, flipping back through his phone. “I’m talking to you.”

“Yes, but they can’t see me,” John unnecessarily reminded, pressing a hand to his uniform. “To everyone else, you look like a nutjob.”

“I’ve never put much stock in the opinions of others,” Sherlock muttered, and John barked a laugh.

“No,” he said, strangely soft, and Sherlock looked to find him smiling fondly up at him, “you don’t, do you?”

Sherlock smiled, shaking his head as he ducked his face back to his phone, and John chuckled, the two of them falling silent as they walked, only Sherlock’s steps audible on the pavement.

“Sherlock?” John asked as they neared the corner, and Sherlock lifted a brow to him. John’s eyes were focused out ahead, pinched with anxiety, his jaw stiff. “What-What happens now?” he asked, flicking a brief glance up. “I mean, what do I- Where do I go?”

Sherlock stopped, John taking a few more steps before he noticed, turning back with an inquiring tilt of his head. “I thought it was apparent,” Sherlock said, but John only frowned. “You’re going with me.”

“Well, yeah,” John answered, tipping his head at the obvious, “but I mean after that. After this whole case thing.” He waved a hand down at Sherlock’s phone before slipping them into his pockets. “Where do I go then?”

Sherlock blinked, mouth opening and closing several times before he could manage to make the desired words come out. “With me,” he said, much softer than intended, and John’s eyes sharpened, searching between his. “I-I’ve been looking for a flatmate,” he muttered, shrugging as his eyes drifted away from John’s gaze. “Can’t find anyone remotely suitable. I think it’s all the breathing.”

John chuckled, and Sherlock looked back to find the man smiling cautiously at him. “Sherlock,” he said, stepping forward, “you know- I mean, I’m not- I can’t really be your flatmate.”

“Why not?” Sherlock argued, and John’s mouth popped open, a strangled sound of disbelief creaking from his throat.

“Because I- I can’t pay rent!” he urged, arms lifting at his sides. “I can’t chip in for groceries, or-or help tidy up, or- I can’t do anything!”

“You do stuff all the time,” Sherlock reminded, and John sighed exasperatedly, running a hand through his hair, and the strands caught on the sunlight like they were real, like Sherlock could reach out and touch the spun gold.

“Well, okay, yes, but it’s not the same, I-“

“John?” Sherlock interjected, and the man stopped, turning back to him, something helpless in his eyes. “Do you- Do you not want to?” he asked, infinitely grateful for how quickly John shook his head.

“No, it’s not that, I just-”

“Then it doesn’t matter.” Sherlock shook his head, stepping closer as John blinked up at him. “I- I play the violin when I'm thinking,” he muttered, twisting his hands in front of him, “and-and
sometimes I don’t talk for days on end, and, if that won’t bother you, well then”—he shrugged, peering through his lashes at John’s dumbstruck face—“none of the rest of it bothers me.”

John stared at him, eyes searching shrewdly between Sherlock’s, and then, slowly, they softened. “Really?” he breathed, and Sherlock nodded, John’s smile growing. “What if I start… rattling chains or something?”

Sherlock laughed, shaking his head as they began walking again, John beaming at his side. “That would hardly be the strangest thing to happen in my flat.”

“Really?” John inquired, lifting a brow, and then laughing as Sherlock nodded. “You’re going to be the death of me, Sherlock Holmes,” he sighed, and Sherlock glared down at him, the man only grinning in response. “Hey, can I see those pictures again?” he asked, and begrudgingly, Sherlock complied.

He held the phone out in front of him, flicking through them on John’s command, and then, both suddenly and in slow motion, John reached out, hand gripping onto the back of Sherlock’s as he tilted the phone further toward him.

They froze on the pavement, John eyes shooting wide a second after Sherlock’s as he stared down at his fingers, moving them in tentative testing.

Sherlock gasped, feeling John’s fingers sliding over his, nothing like a human touch—not that he was particularly accustomed to those—but still definitively there, like when the sheets shift to graze past your skin in the night. It wasn’t warm, but it wasn’t cold either, like a breeze still clinging to winter as spring rolls in, and then it was gone, John’s fingers withdrawing rather than fading away.

“I- I don’t-” John murmured, turning his hand over in front of his face. He then looked up to Sherlock, eyes wide with wonder. “Did you-” he started to ask, but Sherlock cut him off with a nod. He dropped his eyes back to his fingers, waggling them through the air. “Wow,” he breathed, seemingly incapable of anything more, but, then again, all Sherlock could do was agree.

“Yeah,” he whispered, blinking down at his own hand, “wow.” He looked up, John smiling gently at him as his eyes flicked between the mobile and Sherlock’s face.

“Well alright then,” he said, shrugging a shoulder, smiling slowly growing to a smirk, and Sherlock couldn’t help but follow, their grins turning into laughter.

“Come on,” Sherlock chuckled, bobbing his head forward, feeling a blush creeping up his neck, and he adjusted his coat collar accordingly, “before Lestrade sends out a search party.”

John laughed, but did follow, the both of them rounding the corner as Sherlock tried to flag down a cab.

His mobile beeped where he had stored it back in his pocket, and he pulled it out, opening the text message, and then promptly bursting into laughter.

“What?” John asked, and Sherlock turned the screen to him, beyond words.

_**Should I be worried that you’re walking down the street talking to yourself? MH**_

John shook his head, but he couldn’t entirely press the smile from his lips. “I told you,” he muttered, eyes twinkling, “people will talk.”

Sherlock slipped the phone back into his pocket, grinning back at the man. “People do little else.”
Chapter Summary

Prompt: One of them gets a tummy-ache from eating all of the Halloween candy - ink-and-paper-heart

Friendly reminder that I am going to be doing a 25 Days of Christmas thing like this, so you can leave prompts on my tumblr or here!

Also, I made a playlist for Johnloctober!

Chapter Notes

References:
"Let slip the dogs of war" is a line from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.
(Yes, RebMax12, I did it again [twice if you count the title]. It is apparently a real problem.)

The doorbell rang, a chorus of “trick-or-treat” wafting up the stairs to where Sherlock sat at the table, peering down a microscope as he twitched the dial into focus.

“Mrs. Hudson,” he called, rolling his eyes down at the blood sample, “more costumed birth-control failures!”

There was no reply, no bustling of feet and fussing to assure the ne’er-do-wells of her approach, and, as the doorbell rang a second time, Sherlock lifted his head.

“Mrs. Hudson!”

Still, no answer came, and Sherlock stood, grumbling to himself as he flopped down the steps as loud as he could possibly manage.

This shouldn’t be his job—not least of all because he hated interacting with small humans almost as much as the full-size versions—but John was out on a date with the third girl in as many months, and Mrs. Hudson had probably nodded off after one of her soothers again, so he supposed it rested on his shoulders to ensure 221B didn’t get plastered with eggs and shaving foam. Still, he didn’t have to like it.

“Trick-or-treat!” the small gathering of children sang in chorus, thrusting their various bags and buckets out toward him, and Sherlock glared down at them, snatching the bowl of candy from the table in the foyer. It was a fairly traditional group—a witch, a mummy, and a Harry Potter—but there was one girl in a sparkling blue and white dress, at least the tenth version of such a costume Sherlock had seen that evening, and he’d only had to answer the door four times.

“What are you supposed to be?” he asked her, his curiosity finally getting the better of him.
“Elsa!” the girl replied, front tooth proudly missing as she beamed at him.

Sherlock lifted a brow as he dropped a miniature bag of Rowntree’s into her sack. “What’s an Elsa?” he muttered, and she blinked at him, her mouth dropping open.

“You haven’t seen Frozen!?” she spluttered, incredulous, and he frowned at her, tipping his head.

“What? No, I-”

“Leave it, Cassie,” Harry Potter said, grabbing her by the arm and tugging her backward toward the steps. “He’s old, and Frozen is for kids.”

“I’m 20,” Sherlock deadpanned, and the mummy looked up at him with wide green eyes where he still stood on the porch.

“My sister’s 20!” he squeaked excitedly, grinning when Sherlock turned his attention to him.

“And how old are you?” he asked, and the boy held up his hands, his bucket temporarily resting on his wrist.

“Six,” he said, stretching out the appropriate number of fingers.

“Huh,” Sherlock mused, a small smile playing at his mouth, “I was right about the birth control.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock assured, shaking his head down at the boy’s wrinkled expression. “Here,” he added, dropping his voice conspiratorially as he placed an extra bite-size chocolate bar in the boy’s bucket. “Now, hurry up before they leave you behind.”

The mummy beamed at him, tiny teeth glittering up from beneath his bandages. “Thank you!” he chirped, and tore off after his companions, bucket swinging madly from his hand.

Sherlock chuckled, leaning against the doorframe as he shook his head after them, and then slipped back inside, placing the bowl of sweets back on the interior table.

“Oh!” Mrs. Hudson stumbled out of her door, brushing at her sleep-matted hair. “Were those more trick-or-treaters? I’m sorry, dear, I thought they’d all gone.”

“It’s alright,” Sherlock said, batting a hand at her. “I was nearly done anyway. I can stick around to catch the stragglers if you want to go back to bed.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” the woman immediately countered, but chuckled as Sherlock lifted his eyebrows. “Well, alright. If you’re sure,” she continued hesitantly, giving up on her hair. “I suppose you’ll be waiting up for John anyway. Where was it he went off to again?”

Sherlock’s stomach twisted, but he forced a smile, swallowing down his discomfort. “Party,” he replied with a nod. “Some costume thing with the latest romantic prospect.”

“Jeanette,” Mrs. Hudson reminded, nodding thoughtfully to herself. “Interesting young woman. Can you believe she wouldn’t eat any of my lemon bars?”

“Well, I was there, so-”

“Said they were fattening!”
“I know.”

“And then she started asking me if I used fresh-squeezed or store-bought lemon juice.”

“I was literally standing right next to you.”

“And what brand of confectioners’ sugar.”

“And whether the crust was gluten free,” Sherlock concluded, and Mrs. Hudson blinked at him, startled a moment before she smiled, chuckling as she moved to swat him on the arm.

“Oh, you,” she tutted, and Sherlock smiled at the fond chiding. “Can’t an old woman rant in peace?”

“About Jeanette?” Sherlock muttered with a flick of his eyebrows. “Please, rant all you like.”

“You don’t like her then?”

Sherlock froze a moment, his heart stuttering as he thought. “I don’t like her any less than I did her predecessors,” he replied with a shrug, and it sounded easy enough, but Mrs. Hudson’s eyes were glinting with knowing as she dipped her head, lifting a brow.

“But you hated all of them,” she said, and Sherlock sniffed, waving a dismissive hand through the air.

“No, I didn’t,” he scoffed. “They’re never around long enough for me to develop any particular feeling one way or the other.”

“Yes, you make quite certain of that.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, dear,” Mrs. Hudson sighed, flicking a hand over her shoulder as she turned back toward her flat, Sherlock glaring suspiciously at the back of her head. “I think I will head back to bed, if you can mind the door.”

Sherlock nodded, and she smiled, stepping through her door.

“Don’t stay up too late,” she added, pointing a finger at him.

“It’s not even 9,” Sherlock said, but Mrs. Hudson only shrugged.

“All the same,” she chirped, and Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head at her. “Goodnight, love,” she bade, giving him a soft smile before closing the door.

“Goodnight, Mrs. Hudson,” he replied just before the click of the latch, and then turned back to the main door. He sighed heavily at the wood, quiet for the moment, and then moved to the stairs, sitting on the third step up, his legs stretched down beneath him.

John had only been gone an hour, and Sherlock already didn’t know what to do with himself. He’d tried focusing on a case, the latest Lestrade had sent over, but it was, oddly enough, difficult to concentrate without John distracting him, puttering around fussing over the mess or scrabbling through the cupboard for biscuits.

They’d lived together since starting university a few years ago—for Sherlock, at least, John living in the dorms for a year until Sherlock started uni—and, for all that time, they hadn’t spent much apart, at least not with Sherlock idling away at Baker Street. John was always there when he was home,
John having insisted on orchestrating his schedule in such a way so Sherlock would never be left alone in the flat again, even though Sherlock thought he’d handled the small chemical fire fairly well. Sure, there was an acid burn on their table now that sort of looked like Italy if you squinted, but that was just added character, a quirk of living at 221B. Nevertheless, John had persisted, and, consequently, this was his fault, making Sherlock incapable of spending an evening alone in his own home. Selfish bastard.

Sherlock sighed, fishing his phone out of his pocket before leaning his elbows on the step behind him.

John hadn’t answered all night. Sherlock hadn’t sent him much, of course—an update on the case and a reminder to get milk—but, still, it irked him. This was John’s third date with Jeanette, about halfway through the honeymoon phase and a third of the way through the relationship. The longest anyone had held on had been a month and 10 days, and, Sherlock had to admit, he had almost been rooting for Mary at the end. Not quite enough to stop himself from saving cases up so he could pretend to suddenly get a call whenever John attempted to sleep over, but he’d at least considered the moral high ground for about five seconds, and, really, she ought to be proud of that.

Mary had been John’s previous girlfriend, who he had broken up with almost four weeks ago. She was blonde, beautiful—if you were into that sort of thing—and not remotely shy about stating her mind, which she’d made perfectly clear when she’d stopped by Baker Street specifically to speak to him after they’d broken up, having just seen John in town and thus knowing he wouldn’t be home.

‘You have to tell him,’ she had said without preamble when he’d opened the door, her arms crossed and eyes glinting. She also hadn’t given him the chance to reply, cutting him off the second his mouth even considered moving. ‘You might be content to sit around and pine forever, ruining his chances with everyone else, but John deserves better than that, Sherlock, he wants better than that; he’s trying to find better than that. So man the fuck up before a woman beats you to it.’

And then she had left, ripping through him and away like a tornado of lavender perfume and righteous fury.

Sherlock twirled his phone in his hands, Mary’s words bouncing around in his head as he waited for the screen to illuminate, for the message tone to sound, but then what? John would tell him he could get the milk, Sherlock would say he always got the wrong kind, John would say he only did that in hopes that he’d stop being asked, Sherlock would lie and say that wasn’t true, and then another girlfriend would come home and glare at him for texting her boyfriend all night while John put the milk in the fridge. It wasn’t always milk, of course, but it always played out the same, the same steps to the same song on an endless loop they called their lives.

Sherlock knew it was getting more difficult, could feel the knot growing tighter and tighter in his throat with every breakup sigh that whistled from John’s lungs when he walked up the steps after the last date, smiling softly at him, the sort of smile that meant he knew Sherlock already knew, but he’d rather not talk about it just yet. He would ask if Sherlock wanted tea, and Sherlock would always say yes, knowing John needed something to do with his hands. While he was in the kitchen, Sherlock would find one of the James Bond movies they had on the DVR, and they would then both pretend it had just happened to be on Channel 4, a fiction they would perpetuate by not skipping the advertisements.

Sherlock had almost told him last time, when John had finally gotten home about an hour after Mary had left, but he had lost his nerve, not entirely sure what he would say anyway. It wasn’t like he’d ever been in a relationship, or had any real idea how they worked at all. It had taken him years figure out he even liked John, and, even with that realization terrifyingly in place, he had no idea what to do
with it. It wasn’t as if he could just pop into the kitchen for breakfast one morning and casually drop in: “So, I think I’ve been a little bit in love with you ever since you punched that guy who called me a faggot in Year 12, and, even though I have no experience in the area, the only person I can imagine being with without wanting to throw up is you, so could you maybe put up with my neuroses for the rest of your life? Oh, and we’re out of strawberry jam.”

Sherlock groaned, leaning back against the steps, the wood almost comforting in how painfully it dug into his spine, an anchor when he felt everything was spinning out away from him.

‘You might be content to sit around and pine forever…’

He blinked up at the ceiling, Mary’s voice practically his conscience after all the weeks he’d spent dwelling on it, but imaginary-Mary had a point. He was just sitting here, quite literally draped over the steps of 221B while John was out with yet another woman braver than Sherlock, and he was nothing close to content. He was bitter and spiteful and aching, and he hated himself for it, hated every second he let tick by doing nothing.

‘He wants better than that; he’s trying to find better than that.’

And John was trying, again and again while Sherlock just sat and wished he would stop, but how could he blame John for that? How could he resent him for looking for something Sherlock hadn’t told him he wanted to provide? Still, irrational as it was, he expected John to know, expected John to see it in his eyes when he introduced his latest girlfriend. The girlfriends always seemed to notice, eyeing him up-and-down, a rival to be assessed, and yet, still, Sherlock did nothing. He let them go out, and then he spoiled it, and then they did it all over again, a skipping record no one dared venture off the comfortable sofa to stop, to allow to roll forward, because, no matter how uncomfortable this private hell, the unknown was infinitely more terrifying.

So, with a sigh and a bitter taste in his mouth, Sherlock lifted his phone, swiping out a message.

*We’re also out of biscuits SH*

He lowered the phone to the step, and then promptly snapped it back up again.

*The ones I like, not the ones you like SH*

And again.

*Otherwise I wouldn’t care SH*

He tapped at the edges of the mobile, biting his lip down at the screen.

Maybe John would read it and laugh. Maybe he would read it and realize he was in love with Sherlock and didn’t want to be at some stupid party wearing some stupid Ten costume while dancing with Jeanette and he would rush home but remember the milk and biscuits so they could eat them and watch James Bond after John snogged him stupid on the sofa.

With a snarl of internal frustration, he began Phase 2, guilt climbing thick and acrid in his throat.

*I think I can get the toaster working so we won’t have to buy a new one SH*

He waited, counting 15 seconds, a reasonable amount of time to search the drawers in the kitchen.

*Where’s the screwdriver? SH*
His foot tapped impatiently against the wood, teeth digging into his lip as he waited for John to ask him if he’d unplugged it, to tell him not to electrocute himself, to tell him to just leave it, to remind him of the time he’d tried to fix the microwave and brought down the power on the whole block. And then Sherlock wouldn’t respond, and John would get worried, and he’d be back in 15-23 minutes, depending on traffic.

God, he was a horrible person.

The mobile beeps, and he scrambled to lift it in front of his face, the plastic nearly slipping through his fingers in the process.

**Stop texting my bf**

Sherlock blinked, fingers hovering over the screen.

Jeanette? he finally managed to type, and the response was instantaneous.

**Yes now stop texting. Im deleting your messages.**

Sherlock could hear the blood rushing in his ears, all sound dead to him apart from the pounding of his heart and the final message beep.

**Oh and don’t wait up**

He swallowed, bile climbing up his throat as his stomach curdled, and he might have crushed the mobile in his hand if he hadn’t thrown it, the phone pinging off the entryway carpet before slamming hard against the wall. Sherlock glared down at where it fell to the floor, his chest heaving with fury as he threw himself to standing, pacing across the foyer to expel the energy he could feel shaking at his fingertips. He wanted to scream, to claw the horrible paper from the walls and then strangle her with it, but, in the end, it didn’t matter, none of it mattered, because Jeanette was out with John and he was still here, sitting and waiting for something he could only do for himself.

‘So man the fuck up before a woman beats you to it.’

He growled, spinning on his heels as he paced back across the foyer, mind spiraling away in a tangle of furious thought. As he turned again, he caught the bowl of sweets with his elbow, sending it toppling to the floor with a spray of gummies and chocolate. With a curse, he knelt to the ground, righting the bowl and shuffling the sweets back inside, and then stalled, his hand hovering over a Bounty bar.

He had been eight the first time he’d had one, eating through the entire bar before he realized he didn’t feel quite right. His mouth tingled, his head spun, and his stomach revolted, and, a night of agony and trip to the doctor later, it had turned out he was allergic to coconut. It hadn’t really bothered him, coconut not exactly his favorite thing to begin with, and, though he had to be a little careful at Indian restaurants, it was hardly a debilitating allergy. It was also not particularly dangerous, however uncomfortable, and, as Sherlock looked out over the pile, finding three bite-size bars, Jeanette’s text twisted back across his mind.

**Don’t wait up**

He snatched the bars off the floor, sitting back against the wall as he unwrapped the first, hovering it in front of his lips. It was crazy, borderline delusional, and he should probably be calling some sort of hotline for even considering it, but all he did was take a deep breath, steeling himself as he stared down the chocolate.
“Let slip the dogs of war,” he murmured, and popped the entire thing into his mouth before starting on the next.

---

“Oh, you foolish boy,” Mrs. Hudson tutted, wiping a cool cloth over his forehead where she perched next to him on the sofa. “What were you thinking!? You know you have an allergy!”

“I forgot,” Sherlock whined, turning his head toward her where he lay on the pillow.

“Bollocks,” she snapped, and Sherlock looked past her to the wall, unable to meet her scorn directly.

Perhaps it was the years of looking after her own son—a man they had never seen or met—but Mrs. Hudson had awoken almost the second Sherlock had started throwing up, kneeling down on the bathroom floor beside him with a steadying hand to his back. She’d dragged him to the sofa immediately after, grabbing a bucket from the kitchen just in case, and draped a blanket over him as she dabbed at his face, soothing over his fevered skin.

Sherlock’s stomach clenched again, and he turned, ready to grab for the bin, but it was yet another false alarm, and he settled back into the pillows, groaning at his own stupidity.

This was the worst idea he had ever had, utterly ridiculous, illogical, impulsive—

“You know you’re allergic,” he snipped, but his eyes were concerned, roving over Sherlock’s face, his physician-in-training gaze lingering over the pulse in his neck.

“I-I must’ve deleted it,” Sherlock croaked, and John snorted, shaking his head down at Sherlock’s legs with a fond smile.

“Heh,” he muttered, Sherlock’s shortness of breath only worsening as John fixed his blue eyes on his face. “Honestly, we’re going to have to get you a medical tattoo, because I don’t think a bracelet—”

“See, I told you, he’s fine.”

Sherlock’s stomach rolled for an entirely different reason, a cringe creasing over his face, and he couldn’t entirely wipe it away before John looked back to him, a hint of curiosity passing over the boy’s features before his eyes were once again drawn up.

“Now can we go?” Jeanette snapped from somewhere behind Sherlock’s head, and he was immensely grateful for Mrs. Hudson fixing her with a glare on his behalf.

“Go?” John asked, brow furrowing as his shoulders pulled taut, the tell-tale sign that, whatever
argument you had started, you were about to lose, but, apparently, there were some lessons about
John Watson that Jeanette had yet to learn.

“Back to the party,” she coaxed, stepping into Sherlock’s field of vision if he craned his neck a bit,
although she was pointedly ignoring him. “I told you in the cab. We could come up and see if he was
alright, and still make it back in time for the costume contest.”

“Yeah,” John drawled, clearly unimpressed, and he rose to standing, arms crossed formidably, “and I
told you ‘not a chance in hell’.”

Sherlock coughed, a faint attempt to stifle a laugh, and, while John flicked a small smile down to
him, Jeanette opted to glare.

“Oh, for the love of- Don’t you see what he’s doing!?” Jeanette raged, flinging a hand down toward
him, and Sherlock winced, turning his head away from her shrill tone. “He’s just trying to ruin this!
He’s probably not even sick!”

“Oh, he’s sick, alright,” Mrs. Hudson bit, patting his head with the towel again. “The sleeves of my
nightie can attest to that.”

“Sorry about that,” Sherlock murmured, but the woman only smiled at him, wiping the cloth down
his cheeks.

“Never you mind, dear,” she assured. “It’s old anyway. Gives me a reason to treat myself.” She
winked at him, and Sherlock smiled, a tender moment Jeanette promptly ruined.

“Well, fine then,” she barked, eyes sharpening over Mrs. Hudson’s shoulder, “even if he is really
sick, he probably did it on purpose. You said yourself he knew he had an allergy.”

Mrs. Hudson spluttered, mouth agape and eyes glinting as she rounded on the girl. “Why, of all the-”

“So?”

Sherlock blinked, a stunned gesture reiterated by the rest of the group as they all turned to John.

The boy hadn’t moved, but something still felt like it had shifted, a tightness in his jaw and steel in
his eyes that denied any argument. “I don’t care how it happened,” he asserted, shaking his head.
“He’s sick, and I’m not leaving. If you want to go back for the costume contest, go. No one’s
stopping you.”

“But we’re Ten and Rose!” she countered, the Union Jack shirt suddenly making sense, Jeanette
never exactly striking him as the national pride type. “No one will get it if you’re not there with me!”

“Well, unfortunately, my priorities are in a slightly different order,” John replied, and the woman’s
mouth clapped closed.

She glared furiously at him a moment, fists clenching to her sides. “Fine!” she raged, eyes sparking
between him and Sherlock. “But this is the last time, John Watson! I am not playing second fiddle to
some-some freak any-”

John didn’t say anything, didn’t directly cut her off at all, but the decisiveness with which he moved
might as well have been a shout, a slamming door on the conversation, and he rounded the coffee
table, all of them silently watching as he approached Jeanette, fishing his wallet out of his pocket.
“Here,” he grated out, holding out a note between his two fingers. “For the cab.”
Jeanette blinked down at the money a moment, apparently flabbergasted to actually be called out on her threat, and then snapped it away, stomping to the door before turning back to glare at him. “I hope you two will be very happy together,” she snarled, but John only smiled, tipping his head.

“I’ll be sure to send you an invitation to the wedding,” he answered, and Jeanette huffed, stomping down the steps, the whole building shaking with the slam of the door.

Silence rang out around the room, no one seeming to dare even breathe, and then John sighed, shaking his head at the empty doorway.

“Well,” he muttered, turning back to them, rubbing a hand up the back of his neck, “that’s going to be all over Twitter. I wonder what hashtag she’ll pick.” He smiled, the same sad thing Sherlock was always the cause of, but it hurt so much more this time, him having to witness the cause the way he had. “Anybody want tea?” he asked, and Sherlock winced at his turned back as the blond headed into the kitchen.

“Oh, no, dear,” Mrs. Hudson replied, looking somewhat shaken by the proceedings. “I can’t have caffeine this late. Gives me nightmares.”

John’s turned head nodded, their usual response when Mrs. Hudson shared details they couldn’t relate to. “You don’t have to stay, Mrs. Hudson,” he said, moving back to lean against the doorjamb as he looked in on them. “I can watch him now.”

Sherlock glared at him. “I’m right here, ya know,” he snapped, but John only grinned at him.

“I noticed,” he said, tipping his head and chuckling as Sherlock sniffed.

“Well,” Mrs. Hudson murmured, biting her lip in hesitation as she looked warily between them, “if—if you’re sure…”

“I am,” John assured, giving her a nod before turning back to the boiling kettle.

Mrs. Hudson turned, dropping down to plant a small brush of a kiss to Sherlock’s forehead. “Feel better,” she wished, stroking stray curls from his forehead, and then stood, brushing the skirt of her nightie down as she moved to the doorway. “Goodnight, boys,” she bade, and they mumbled the sentiment back at her, Sherlock listening to the progress of her steps as she moved down the stairs, her own flat door closing with a soft click below them.

John clinked around in the kitchen, sliding drawers and rattling spoons the only soundtrack to Sherlock’s racing thoughts.

He felt sick, the type of sickness that’s in your soul more than your stomach. Guilt plucked at his insides, ripping and tearing at the scaffolding of justification he had built at the start of this ordeal, and now it was all crashing down atop him, a weight he couldn’t begin to lift.

John did deserve better, so much better. Better hadn’t been Jeanette, of course, but better wasn’t Sherlock either, cowardly weaseling his way in to selfishly block John’s chances of happiness to temporarily stave off his own loneliness. It was weak and pathetic and disgustingly human of him, and he had to stop, they had to stop. The record had to play on, no matter what the next track was.

“Tea?” John asked, perching in the space Mrs. Hudson had vacated, his hip at Sherlock’s shoulder.

“I- No,” Sherlock murmured, shaking his head, and John smiled, placing both cups on the table in front of him.
“Well, it’s there, if you change your mind,” he said softly, looking down at Sherlock with miserable sympathy. “How ya feelin’?” he inquired, and Sherlock’s mouth stalled open a moment as John pressed a hand to his forehead, brow furrowed in concern over curious blue eyes.

“Fine,” he muttered, clearing his throat as John threw him a skeptical look. “I mean, I’ll probably live.”

John chuckled, withdrawing his hand, and Sherlock tried to suck in air without making it too obvious he had temporarily stopped. “Yeah, prognosis looks good,” he replied, smiling at Sherlock over his shoulder as he gingerly lifted his tea from the table.

Sherlock twisted his fingers in the blanket, rolling his lips over his teeth as he worked up the courage. “John?” he barely whispered, but the blond turned, peering inquisitively over the top of his mug. “I’m sorry,” he said, eyes fluttering to John’s chest instead of his face, but he could still see the boy’s expression on the periphery of his vision, the slack jawed shock stretching over it.

“For what?” he replied, uncommonly still.

“I- About Jeanette,” Sherlock mumbled, lifting a weak gesture backward to the door. “About your date.”

John chuckled faintly, shifting as he replaced his cup. “It’s alright,” he assured, sliding up near Sherlock’s head. “It was probably gonna be the last one anyway. She really likes her clubs. Hey, budge up, would ya?” He tapped at Sherlock’s shoulder, and Sherlock complied, lifting his back as John directed him.

“What are you-” he started, confused, but then John slid back onto the sofa behind him, guiding Sherlock gently back down, his neck cradled on John’s thigh. He blinked up, the inverted face smiling softly at him.

“That okay?” he asked, fingers grazing through Sherlock’s curls, and Sherlock thought he saw a tint of pink rising around his collar, a touch of real fear in his bright eyes.

“Yeah,” Sherlock managed to wheeze, nodding slightly against John’s leg. “Yeah, it’s- It’s fine.”

John smiled, and then leaned forward, snatching the remote off the table. “Yeah, I probably shouldn’t have let that one get past the first date, to be honest,” he sighed, clicking through the channels. “That was when we got that decapitation, remember?” he asked, looking down to Sherlock pillowed in his lap, and Sherlock nodded, swallowing down yet another lie—that he’d had that case for days before strategically interrupting their date. “She would not stop asking me who I was texting,” he said, shaking his head out at Torchwood. “And, when I came back from the loo, my phone wasn’t where I’d left it on the table.”

“How do you know?” Sherlock asked, blinking up at the bottom of his chin before John dipped it.

“Because I lined it up with a groove in the wood,” he replied, smiling as Sherlock chuckled. “See, I’ve picked up a thing or two.” He rattled his leg teasingly, shaking Sherlock lightly where he rested on it.

“The student has surpassed the teacher,” Sherlock replied, and John scoffed.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” he muttered, looking back to the show. “Oh well,” he sighed, “more lessons learned for next time.”

Sherlock swallowed, barely reining in a need to snatch for his bucket. “Ya know,” he murmured,
eyes pointedly fixed on *Torchwood*, though it was all out of focus, “you could…wait a while. Take-a break.”

“A break?” John questioned, and Sherlock felt him shift to look down at him, though he himself did not turn. “Like…from dating, you mean?”

Sherlock shrugged, as if he didn’t care much one way or the other, as if his heart wasn’t pounding in his throat, as if it wasn’t the most important conversation he had ever had. “Well, yeah,” he easily replied, his brain beginning to throb under the stress. “Might not be a bad idea.”

John was silent, far too silent, and eerily still beneath Sherlock’s cheek. “Why?” he asked, and Sherlock closed his eyes, bracing himself against the suspicion in John’s tone.

“I-I don’t know,” he attempted to concede, shrugging against the sofa, his mouth dry and head aching, and, suddenly, all he wanted to do was sleep, to forget this act of idiocy and hope tomorrow wasn’t any worse. “I just…think it may be beneficial.”

“Why?” John pressed, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder, but Sherlock still did not look back to him. “Tell me. Why do you not want me dating?”

“I didn’t say that,” Sherlock argued, flicking a glare over his shoulder, and then found he couldn’t look away.

“Didn’t you?” John replied, eyes glittering with focus in the dark as they searched between Sherlock’s, a crease between his brows. “Sherlock,” he said, voice growing stern even with its softness, “I’m gonna ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth, alright? No matter what.”

Sherlock swallowed, his lips trembling as they closed.

“Can you do that?” the blond asked, expression earnest, and how could Sherlock say he didn’t know, how could he do anything but nod and hope it didn’t ruin everything? John swallowed, steadying himself as he looked to Sherlock’s chest a moment. “Did you- Did you do it on purpose?” he questioned, dropping his head toward Sherlock’s, who couldn’t entirely hide his flinch. “Getting sick. Did you eat that chocolate on purpose?”

It would be impossible to say how much time passed with Sherlock just staring at him, blinking and panicking and wishing he could lie, but, for all the underhanded things he had done in his life, that was the one he knew would keep him up at night.

“I- Yes,” he whispered to John’s shirt, the button-down protruding from the blue suit he’d picked up at a thrift shop for his costume.

“Why?” he pressed, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder, but Sherlock still did not look back to him. “Tell me. Why do you not want me dating?”

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John’s chest fluttered with a breath, Sherlock watching it flex through his lungs. “Why?” he breathed, and Sherlock swallowed, trying to turn his head away. “No, don’t- Don’t do that, talk to me.” John hooked him gently around the chin, pulling him back. “Why would you do that? You know reactions can get worse as you get older. Why would you take a risk like that?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock muttered, struggling against John’s grip, but, frail as the pressure was, Sherlock was even weaker.

“Sherlock,” John pressed, and it was so desperate, so insistent, that Sherlock was certain he already knew, demanding to hear it aloud more than he was demanding an answer.

The brunette sighed, wilting against John’s hand, which lingered at his chin, as if afraid he would
make a break for it without the grazing touch of the digits. “I- I didn’t- I don’t like it when you’re
gone,” he murmured, hiding as best he was able with John keeping him in place, ducking his eyes
and tucking his chin. “I- I wanted you here. I always want you here, I- I want you…” He trailed
away, finding whatever more he had intended for that sentence was not really necessary, the point
accidentally already made.

John’s fingers quivered away from his skin, even his breaths shaking, and Sherlock dared not look
up, his eyes focused fuzzily on the light of the television shifting on the wall behind the sofa. “You-
You want me?”

Sherlock blinked, his head throbbing in time with the pounds of his heart. “Maybe,” he squeaked,
another bout of bile rolling up his throat as he felt John jolt with a gasp. “But I don’t- I mean, it’s not-
I-I can get over it, you don’t have to move out or-”

“Wait, what?” John interjected, and Sherlock did look at him then, blue eyes wide beneath a
furrowed brow. “Move out?” he parroted, shaking his head. “Why would I move out?”

Sherlock stared at him, perplexed, the adrenaline starting to wane as exhaustion tugged at his already
fogging mind. “Because-Because I- And you’re not- You don’t-” A spike of pain drilled through his
skull, and he hissed, eyes pinching the faint light of the TV into darkness.

“Okay,” John soothed, shifting further up on the couch, a hand coming to rest on Sherlock’s arm.
“Okay, we’ll talk about it in the morning, alright? You need to sleep.”

“No, I- No,” Sherlock argued, trying to shake his head, an endeavor quickly cut off as the pain
intensified. He squinted, focusing John’s face, tanned features creasing down at him in concerned
confusion. “John, I- You have to-”

“It’s okay, Sherlock.”

“No! I-”

“Sherlock.” John reached down, one hand catching Sherlock’s where it rested on the brunette’s
chest, the other moving to his hair, pushing gently through the curls. He smiled while Sherlock
simply gaped at him, stunned. “It’s okay,” he urged, slipping his fingers between Sherlock’s, and
Sherlock realized belatedly it was directly over his heart, John most assuredly able to feel the
quickening of the beat.

“I- Really?” he breathed, and John chuckled, fingers gliding along the edge of Sherlock’s forehead
before tucking a curl behind his ear.

“Really,” he whispered, and Sherlock might have burst into tears if he wasn’t so damn tired. “Might
have to relax that whole no dating rule though,” he added, tipping his head, and Sherlock chuckled
weakly as he grinned.

“I think I can manage that,” he murmured, turning his head in toward John as he gripped back
against his fingers.

“You think so, hmm?” John teased, and Sherlock nodded against his thigh.

“Mhmm,” he hummed, closing his eyes, exhaustion beginning to overtake him now that his mind
wasn’t racing.

John chuckled softly, fingers steadily carding through his hair, and Sherlock was almost asleep
before something tugged at his last fragment of consciousness, and he struggled to make his mouth
obey the command to speak.

“John?”

“Hmm?”

Sherlock sighed, wriggling further down into the sofa. “I wasn’t lying about the milk,” he mumbled, and John stilled a moment before starting to laugh. “We really are out.”

“I’ll pick some up tomorrow,” John assured, and Sherlock nodded, glad that was cleared up. “Now, go to sleep.”

John’s fingers slid through his hair, cool where they grazed against the back of his neck, and, with one last clench of his grip, one last check that John’s hand really was intertwined with his, he slipped away into the dark.
The Game Is On

Chapter Summary

Irene didn't tell Sherlock her murder mystery party had a theme, that he'd have to wear a Victorian-era costume, or that he'd be paired up with the too-handsome-for-Sherlock's-own-good John Watson. One of those things, however, he's willing to forgive.

I do so hate goodbyes, but, unfortunately, we have reached the end! I hope you've all enjoyed reading as much as I've enjoyed writing, and I will see you all again for 25 Days of Johnlock! Make sure to leave your prompts on my tumblr or here!

Also, don't forget I made a playlist for Johnloctober!

A note on sequels:
There will be more ghost!John in the Christmas series, and "Subtexting" will be getting a sequel as soon as I can fit it in around MHITAS and the balletlock I'm working on, but I'm hopeful for this month. Those are the only ones planned right now, but it never hurts to ask, so feel free to bother me if you need more of something else.

Chapter Notes

References:
Nail varnish/rouge stuff? All absolutely true!

Sherlock hovered on the doorstep, fingers twitching toward and away from the doorbell as his teeth bit white over his lip. There was no point, really; he might as well leave right now. It wasn’t as if he planned to stay long, and people tend to be more forgiving of you just not coming than they are of you leaving early. Irene would understand. Probably. Possibly.

He huffed, glaring at the doorbell of Irene’s manor, unaccountably furious at it for being so difficult to ring, and then leapt back, startled as the heavy oak swung away from him.

“I thought that was your shadow lurking in the window,” Irene said, smiling as she folded her arms, leaning against the doorjamb.

Sherlock’s eyes scanned down her, stunned, and Irene tilted her head, pushing off the doorframe to shrug at him.

“What?” she asked, lifting her gloved hands as she looked down her dress. “Did you forget about the theme?”

“Theme!?” Sherlock spluttered as he entered, and Irene rolled her eyes, turning and moving back into the foyer to expose the pleats draping down the back of her dress, practically exploding from the corseted bodice pulled tight to her hips.
“Oh, that’s right,” she said with a flick of a black glove. “I didn’t tell you. Figured you wouldn’t come.”

“Well, you figured right,” he snapped, folding his arms, eyes narrowing on the intricate beading and ruffled cap sleeves of Irene’s bodice. “What is the theme, anyway?”

Irene beamed, throwing her arms wide, her deep red dress sparkling in the light. “Late Victorian Era!” she grandly announced, swinging at the folds of her dress.

Sherlock raised a brow. “Why?” he asked, and Irene smirked.

“Because I look fabulous in a corset,” she replied, and Sherlock laughed as she snatched him by the wrist, dragging him toward the stairs. “Now, come on, everyone else will be arriving soon.”

“Wait, what?” Sherlock blustered, craning his neck to catch sight of the hall clock before they rounded the corner. “But you said it started at 9:00.”

“I lied,” Irene clipped with a shrug. “You’re always late, and I needed time to convince you to put on a costume-”

“A what!?”

“-so I told you 9:00, but it’s actually 9:30. And currently”—she paused, pushing open the door of her bedroom and towing Sherlock in behind her as she glanced at her alarm clock—“9:15, so we’ve gotta hurry up.”

“Hurry up? Irene, I am not-”

“Yes, you are,” Irene snapped, and Sherlock clapped his lips shut, glaring at her. She plucked an envelope off her desk, passing it across to him before bustling off toward her closet.

“What’s this?” Sherlock asked, turning the card over in his hands.

“Open it,” the woman answered, waving a hand back at him as she stretched up toward the top shelf.

Warily, Sherlock flipped open the envelope, pulling out a small card. “Oh, for the love of- Really?” he spluttered, and Irene beamed, a cardboard box in her hands and she crossed back to the bed. “A murder mystery party?”

“Mhmm!” Irene chirped, beginning to pull out clothes that Sherlock wasn’t getting close to if she paid him. “Cool, isn’t it? Like live action Cluedo!”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, reading back over his card. “Character bio?” he read, frowning down at the writing. “What-”

“Well, we can’t very well be ourselves, can we?” Irene explained, exasperated, and Sherlock gave her a flat look. The woman chuckled, drawing up to his side as she pointed down at the card. “The names are the same, obviously, but everybody gets different descriptions of who they’re supposed to be from Victorian times.”

“So, we’re all…suspects?” Sherlock supposed, and Irene nodded, striding back to the box and continuing to unload the contents.

“Yep. Everyone gets put into pairs-”

“Pairs?”
“Pairs,” Irene reiterated, eyes sparking as she whipped back to him, and Sherlock let that one go for the time being. “And then they go around—find clues, interview one another, etc.—and try to figure out who the murderer is.”

“And one of the guests is the murderer,” he surmised, and, once again, Irene nodded. “Who’s been murdered?” he asked.

“The Lady Boddy,” Irene replied, and Sherlock snorted. “I couldn’t come up with anything else, alright!?” she defended, and Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head down at his card. “There’s another page in the envelope explaining the murder and everything. I even made up pictures, just for you.”

Sherlock smiled, giving the page a cursory glance. “So, who am I?” he asked, turning over the smaller card again.

“You,” Irene chirped, plucking a few articles from the pile, “are a genius detective who frequently consults with Scotland Yard on the most puzzling and grisly of cases.”

Sherlock raised a brow as the woman moved toward him, a long tweed something draped over her arm. “I already do that,” he muttered, and Irene chuckled.

“Well, yes,” she admitted with a nod, “but now you do it in a deerstalker!”

“A what?” Sherlock questioned, but it was promptly answered, Irene whipping a hat up from her arm and wriggling it down atop his head. Sherlock lifted a hand, touching at the brim, and then met the woman’s grin with his own terrified gaze. “No,” he contested, but she just smirked, unfurling a cape in front of her.

“Come on, Mr. Holmes,” she cajoled, sweeping the cloak around his shoulders, and, instinctively, he caught it at his shoulder. “The game is ON!” she shouted, sweeping past him toward the door.

Sherlock gaped after her, hands gripping into the cape. “What does that even-”

“ON!” Irene bellowed, punching a finger into the air, and Sherlock had no choice but to follow her, though he made sure to grumble loud enough to carry.

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“I hate you,” Sherlock growled, fidgeting with the panels of his cape as he stood beside Irene in the living room, the rest of the guest milling around them in similarly ridiculous garb, their invitations clearly having included the theme and characters.

“No, you don’t,” Irene crooned, slipping her arm through his even as he glared. “You appreciate my efforts to expand your comfort zone.”

“With tweed?” Sherlock snapped, flicking at the cape, and Irene laughed. “So, what’s your character?” he asked, looking out at the other women in the room, all dressed much less elaborately than Irene.


Sherlock shook his head, incredulous, and then his attention was drawn away as Irene whipped her face toward the door.

“Oh, thank god,” she breathed, her grip tightening around Sherlock’s arm. “I was beginning to think
they weren’t gonna make it. Harry! John!”

“John?” Sherlock questioned, stomach leaping, and he tried to tug away from Irene, but it was no use, her hold steel as she dragged him to the foyer. “Let me go!” he hissed out of the corner of his mouth as they made their way toward the pair currently taking their coats off and hanging them on the nearby rack.

“No!” Irene snapped back, though her face was a broad smile directed at the guests. “It’s your own fault for refusing to come to coffee. And the movie and the study session at the library.”

“That’s because I knew they were all setups!” Sherlock snarled, trying yet again to yank himself free.

“Honestly,” Irene huffed, holding him even tighter, “so ungrateful. You spend that whole rugby game drooling over him—”

“I was not!”

“-and then I try and get you a hand-”

“Irene!”

“-and you don’t show up!”

“Does he—” Sherlock started, frantic, but Irene cut him off with a shake of her head.

“No, he doesn’t know you stood him up. As far as he knows, you’re just that guy he spoke to once after a rugby game.”

“Oh,” Sherlock breathed, the knot in his stomach loosening a little. “Okay. Okay, that’s—that’s good.”

“And I might have mentioned a few other things.”

“Like what!?”

“Irene!”

They snapped their heads up to Harry, Irene breaking into a brilliant smile while Sherlock just tried not to make his fury obvious.

“Harry, so glad you could make it!” Irene said, finally releasing Sherlock to give the girl a hug. “I wasn’t sure if you were too good for us kids now that you’ve graduated.”

Harry laughed, brushing at what appeared to be a period maid’s uniform as she broke away from Irene. “I figured I could stoop to your level just this once. And I’m pretty sure you’ve met my brother, John,” she added, waving a hand to the boy behind her, who stepped forward after hanging his brown overcoat.

“Yeah,” the blond confirmed, nodding at Irene as he smiled. “We’ve hung out a few times, actually. How’d your psych midterm go?”

“Oh, how sweet of you to remember!” Irene crooned, and, even though she didn’t look at him, Sherlock could feel that comment was especially for him. “It went well. Better than I expected, at any rate. Though that’s not saying much.” She laughed, the others joining in, and Sherlock took the moment no one was paying attention to reassess John Watson.

The last time he’d seen him, he had been streaked with mud and sweat, his uniform spotted with
grass stains and blood he had assured them wasn’t his—something Sherlock tried very hard not to find stupidly attractive. That had, understandably, been a difficult look for Sherlock to endure, but he wasn’t sure the boy’s present appearance was any better. John was wearing a slate grey suit, a matching vest buttoned underneath with a white collar and black tie protruding from the top. His shoes were worn brown leather, and atop his head rested a black bowler hat that shadowed his eyes somewhat in the light, making them twinkle out like stars caught within the night sky.

‘Stars caught within the night sky’, what the hell was wrong with him!?

“Oh, and you remember my friend,” Irene said, grabbing at Sherlock’s arm again, and Sherlock reconstructed his face into something less smitten as John’s eyes shifted to him. “He was at that rugby game with me. Sh-”


“And you’re medicine,” Sherlock replied, not one to be outdone. “Fourth year, wasn’t it?”

Irene snorted, likely fully aware Sherlock didn’t need to ask, but he didn’t want to look like too much of a freak before they even got out of the foyer.

“Yeah, that’s right,” John said jovially. “Wow, I can’t believe you remembered that.”

“Oh, Sherlock remembers all kinds of things,” Irene interrupted, placing a hand on his arm. “Except my birthday, of course. That one always seems to slip his mind.”

“Well, I have to delete something,” Sherlock muttered, and the group laughed as Irene stuck her tongue out at him.

“Let’s head on inside,” the woman said, waving the group to follow her into the living room. “Get this show on the road.”

They all chuckled, but followed her into the room, where Irene led them toward the fireplace.

“If I can have everyone’s attention!?“ she called, stepping up beside the mantel before turning to face the room. “I think we’re all here now, so we’re gonna get started. First off, thank you all for coming. I know you’d rather be getting drunk at a campus party right now, but I’m glad you chose to come here and keep me company on Halloween instead.”

The room laughed, and then clapped for some strange reason, causing Sherlock to look around with a quirk of his brow, at which point he noticed John doing the same thing.

Their eyes met, and John shot him a hint of a smile, shrugging, and Sherlock returned the smirk before looking back to Irene.

Alright, now, down to business,” she said, clapping her hands together in front of her. “You’ve all been given a character, and you’ve all done spectacularly with your costumes”—another round of self-congratulatory applause—“so now it’s time to put you into pairs and send you off to discover our killer! Oh, and just so you know!” she added, lifting a finger to add to the theatrics. “The murderer already knows who they are, so don’t trust anyone, or they might try to stop you from revealing their secret!”

The room laughed again, and Sherlock shook his head, flummoxed by the idiocy.

“Okay, now, your pairs,” Irene said, winking at them as she produced a folded sheet of paper from
her bust, and even Sherlock had to laugh at that one. “First up,” she said, unfurling the sheet, “is myself and Harry.”

“Of course,” Sherlock muttered, surprised to hear it echo, and turned to find John looking at him with similar surprise, the both of them quickly darting their faces away to avoid laughing.

Irene continued down the list, people shifting this way and that as they were put into couples, and, as the end grew nigh, fewer and fewer people left standing alone, Sherlock knew there was no hope for him.

“And Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson,” she announced, giving Sherlock an impressively loaded glance for it being only a fleeting flick of her eyes. “There are clues hidden around the manor, but only on the bottom level,” she explained, waving around the room. “A few of the household staff will also be milling about, and they all have scripts that will help you, so make sure to interview them when you see them. Any questions?”

Someone to Sherlock’s left actually raised their hand.

“Yes?” Irene called, clearly loving it.

“Can we interview each other too?” the girl asked, and Irene nodded.

“Yes. You were all given an alibi on your character card. Any other questions you ask, however, that person can just make up whatever they feel is in character.” Irene cast another glance around the room, searching for other queries. “Everyone good?” she checked, and, after a murmur of agreement from the crowd, she grinned, clapping her hands once more. “Alright! Well…get to it!”

A rumble of chatter immediately broke out, people gathering pencils and paper from a table set up in the center of the room, but Sherlock just glared, staring down Irene as she moved beside him.

“You’re the devil,” he hissed, and she grinned.

“Sherlock, dear, you’re looking a bit pale,” she said, soft with false concern as she tapped a hand to his face. “Perhaps you should see a doctor.”

Sherlock could feel a flush at his collar, but he beat it down, glowering at the woman, but Irene only giggled, darting away with a flick of her wrist. Sherlock was still glaring at her back when he felt someone come up to his side, a throat clearing at his shoulder.

“Er,” John murmured, adorably self-conscious, “I suppose we should”—he paused, making an indistinct gesture in the air with his hands—“introduce ourselves? Or something?”

“I already know who you are,” Sherlock snapped, immediately regretful, but John only chuckled, shaking his head.

“No, I mean our characters,” he said, and Sherlock flushed properly.

“Oh,” he murmured, and John smiled, ducking his face as he pulled his card from his pocket.

“Here,” he said, handing it across to Sherlock. “Probably faster this way.”

Sherlock nodded, fishing his own out before handing it to John, whose eyebrows immediately lifted.

“Detective, huh?” he quipped, tilting his head at him.

“Consulting detective,” Sherlock instinctively corrected, and then blinked, looking up to meet John’s
curious expression. “I mean- I actually do that,” he murmured, pointing down at the card, really wishing he could have bought a bit more time before exposing this particular aspect of his life. “I consult with Scotland Yard on cases. They call me and- and whatnot.”

“Really?” John asked, looking back down to the card with a quirk of his brows. “That’s…wow,” he muttered, shaking his head. “That’s really rather incredible.” He chuckled, smiling as he handed Sherlock back his card. “I’m afraid none of mine is true,” he added, bobbing his head at his own card in Sherlock’s hand.

“Dr. John Hamish Watson. Retired Army doctor,” Sherlock read, scrolling across the black print. “Served in Afghanistan before being shot in the left shoulder and honorably discharged. Now works in private practice. And your alibi,” he added, turning the card over, “is you were meeting an old friend for dinner.”

John smiled, shrugging. “I suppose the doctor part is true, or almost anyway,” he said, taking back the card as Sherlock passed it to him. “And I did mention to Irene that I was considering joining the army after I graduate, so that might be where she got that.”

“Wait, what?” Sherlock blurted, even more taken aback than John by his reaction. “I-I mean- Why the army?” he asked, swallowing down the flutter of nervous energy batting at the sides of his throat.

John eyed him speculatively a moment before his expression eased, eyes blinking out across the room. “My grandfather served,” he answered, shrugging as he slipped his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “I suppose I just- I dunno,” he muttered, toeing at the carpet, “it’s on the list of options. So, should we get started?” He turned up with a smile, clearly ready to move on from the conversation, and Sherlock, though still fairly certain he might throw up, obliged.

“Sure,” he agreed, and they set off, moving out of the living room and into the foyer. “Where should we start?” he asked, looking at the various rooms and corridors leading off in different directions.

John chuckled, lifting a grin up at him. “I think I’ll defer to you on that one, Mr. Consulting Detective.”

Sherlock’s lips twitched, and he quickly looked away, feeling the tell-tale heat prickling up his neck. “Come on,” he muttered, heading toward the dining room, and John followed, still beaming for some terrifyng reason.

The dining room was fairly uneventful, people scouring for clues Sherlock could tell at a cursory glance weren’t there, so they quickly moved on to the library, where they found a member of Irene’s staff—now, ostensibly, Lady Boddy’s—dressed in the period costume of a servant and dusting at the shelves.

“Er, hello,” John said, lifting his hand in a frail wave, and the woman genuinely startled, spinning back toward them.

“Oh, sorry,” she muttered, stowing the feather duster in the pocket of her apron as she approached, tucking a loose strand of auburn hair behind her ear. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“But you were dusting anyway?” Sherlock asked, tilting his head, and the woman chuckled.

“Well, yes. Practicing, I suppose you could say. Ms. Adler has been adamant we all stay in character,” she replied, brushing at the folds of her skirt, her pink nail varnish bright against the white. “Oh, speaking of which!” she spluttered, and then quickly curtsied, a bright smile on her face when her head lifted again. “Good evening, gentlemen! Is there something I can help you with?”
Sherlock simply blinked, incredulous and more than a little horrified at the twisted mind of Irene Adler, but John just bowed back, a gesture that got him a disconcertingly glowing look from the woman.

She was pretty, Sherlock supposed, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed with rouge, and, as she giggled at John, they blushed even brighter.

Something pinched at the back of Sherlock’s mind, but, before he could make the connection, John spoke.

“Good evening, madam,” he bade, removing his hat, and Sherlock promptly forgot what he had just realized, distracted by the shades of John’s tousled hair. “I was wondering if we could ask you a few questions. I understand you worked for Lady Boddy?”

“Oh, yes, dreadful business,” she replied, shaking her head with a frown, and John flicked a glance up at him, apparently impressed at the acting ability, and then got stuck, head tilting curiously at Sherlock bewitched expression. “She was such a good mistress. Always made sure we were well taken care of. Don’t know what we’re all going to do without her.”

“All?” Sherlock interjected, snapping back to attention, and the woman’s expression faltered, eyes narrowing in momentary assessment.

“Yes,” she said, sliding quickly back into nonchalance. “There are nine of us altogether.”

“Nine?” Sherlock parroted, and the woman nodded. “All women?” he pressed, and she nodded again.

“Yes, sir. It’s an entirely female staff.”

Sherlock closed his mouth, a smile playing at it as the woman watched him wonderingly. “Thank you for your time,” he said, dipping his head quickly before he turned, John sputtering behind him.

“I- Er, yes, thank you,” he muttered, and Sherlock heard a giggle behind his turned back as a pair drifted past the doorway of the dining room. “I mean, this is all pretty detailed, I’ll admit, but why would she-”

“Calling cards,” he murmured back, looking side-to-side to ensure they were alone before he began searching over the tables in the foyer, opening the narrow drawers. “In Victorian times, when people would visit one another’s houses, they would leave-”

“Yes, I know what a calling card is, Sherlock; I’m English,” John snapped, and Sherlock turned to him, eyebrows raised. John rolled his eyes, and Sherlock chuckled, turning back to his task as the blond spoke again. “I’m asking why you need to find them.”

“So I can know who visited,” he replied, moving onto the next table, John shuffling along in his wake.

“You really think Irene’ll have something like that?” he asked, shifting to block Sherlock from view as a pair drifted past the doorway of the dining room. “I mean, this is all pretty detailed, I’ll admit, but why would she-”
“Because the maid was wearing nail varnish,” Sherlock replied, and John stalled, blinking down at him as his forehead creased.

“Nail varnish?” he parroted, head shaking lightly. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It was pristine,” Sherlock elaborated, riffling through what appeared to be old mail, a downright absurd amount of M&S flyers scattered about inside. “Not chipped or anything. No maid would even bother with nail varnish, let alone be able to keep it intact.”

“She probably just forgot to take it off,” John suggested, leaning forward to peer down into the drawer. “I doubt it has anything to do with the case. They probably didn’t even have nail varnish back then.”

“Actually, some version of nail varnish has been around since ancient times, henna originally being used to paint the nails of mummies in ancient Egypt, but the modern variety has been around for some time as well,” Sherlock rattled off, closing the current drawer before moving onto the next. “It was very popular in the Victorian Era—shades of pink and red being the only options available—but manicure salons wouldn’t become commonplace until the 20th century.”

John froze, and, as Sherlock looked up at him, he found wide blue eyes staring at him from over a gaping mouth. “How do you know that?” he urged, and Sherlock paused, frowning.

“I have no idea,” he muttered, and then rattled his head, filing that away for future consideration. “The point is, they had it, and you heard her, Irene is being a harpy about the details.”

“I don’t think those were her exact-”

“Plus, she knew I was going to be here,” Sherlock continued, stopping in his search a moment to grin devilishly up at John, “and I never miss the details.”

John blinked, evidently caught-off-guard, and then smiled tremulously back, head shaking resignedly. “Okay, I’ll bite,” he said, stepping closer as Sherlock resumed his search. “What does it mean that she was wearing nail varnish?”

“And rouge,” Sherlock added, hand hitting something hard at the back of the drawer. “Highly inappropriate for someone of her status, and rather frowned upon in general, seeing as makeup was, at this time, still widely associated with actresses and prostitutes.”

“Prostitutes,” John mused, face thoughtful as he turned it back toward the library, as if he could see through the stairs. “Nine,” he breathed, looking to Sherlock, eyes wide and bright. “There are nine maids.”

“Mhmm,” Sherlock hummed triumphantly, hand gripping onto what felt like a small wooden box, which he quickly removed to confirm it as such. “An all-female staff,” he added with a flick of his brows, and a slow smile bloomed on John’s awestruck face.

“A brothel,” he whispered, shaking his head. “Lady Boddy was the madam of a brothel. And the calling cards-”

“Will tell us who her favorite customers were,” Sherlock concluded, rattling the box, and John beamed, coming around to his side as he opened it.

“Would people really have left calling cards at a brothel?” he asked, tilting his head up to Sherlock as the detective sifted through the slips of paper.
“Possibly. It was all about manners back then. But, regardless,” he added with a shrug, “I’m willing to suspend my disbelief if it means solving this faster.”

“I hear ya,” John murmured, shaking his head gravely. “But, I’ll admit, I was all for it until the costumes part.”

“I didn’t even know there was a theme,” Sherlock muttered bitterly. “Irene had me get here a half hour early, and then ambushed me with a deerstalker.”

“You poor dear,” John soothed, frowning in mock sympathy, and then quickly broke into a smirk as Sherlock glared at him. “So,” he clipped, leaning close to Sherlock’s shoulder, the woody scent of him wafting distractingly up over Sherlock’s face, “whadda we got?”

“Um,” Sherlock stammered, swallowing hard, “there are a lot of names, but a Mr. James called eight times in the past two weeks.”

John’s eyebrows flicked. “Well, that’s a tad excessive,” he muttered. “You think that’s meant to be one of us? I don’t think anyone is named James.”

“No, no one is,” Sherlock confirmed, shaking his head as he frowned down at the card. “Must be a pseudonym.”

“Well, naturally,” John scoffed, and Sherlock tilted his head at him, curious. “Would you use your real name if you had to sign in at a brothel?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever considered it,” Sherlock muttered, shrugging a shoulder, and John laughed, soft and breathy.

“Neither have I,” he chuckled, “but, now that I am…” He trailed off, rolling his hands in the air, and Sherlock nodded.

“Yes, I suppose it makes sense. Still, not much to go on. Anyone can make up a fake name.”

“Well, I’m sure there are other clues,” John assured, eyes roving back out to the foyer. “Feel a bit weird now, though,” he added in a murmur. “I mean, I know it’s not really a brothel, but-”

“Irene,” Sherlock said, and John stopped, turning back to him, head tilted. “Irene’s character is a madam at a brothel,” he added, and John blinked, lips popping apart in comprehension. “Maybe-Maybe Lady Boddy was taking her customers, running too much competition.”

“You really think Irene would cast herself as the killer?” John asked, and Sherlock gave him a flat look. “Yeah, alright, fair enough,” he muttered, waving a hand as Sherlock delved into his pocket, pulling out the invitation envelope.

Taking out the folded slip of paper, he unfurled it on top of the nearest table, pulling at the cord of a nearby lamp to illuminate the diagram of the body.

“Lady Boddy’s…body,” Sherlock murmured, John snorting briefly beside him, “was found in two different trunks in the Thames, entirely dismembered.”

“I worry about that girl,” John mused, shaking his head down at the picture, and Sherlock turned up to him, expression wrinkled with inquiry. “Irene,” John clarified, bobbing a nod down at the page. “She came up with all of this, right? Little bit disturbing she spent time plotting out the dismemberment of an imaginary woman.”
“Let us hope it’s not a plan she intends to put into practice,” Sherlock said, and John’s eyes widened as he nodded deeply.

“From your lips to God’s ears,” he replied, and Sherlock huffed a laugh before returning to the diagram.

“There was bruising around what was left of the neck,” he continued, pointing down at the close up of the neck, marks indicated with shaded patches. “It appears to be manual strangulation; the perpetrator most likely being right-handed.”

“How can you tell?” John asked, tilting his head down at the picture.

“The bruising is more pronounced on the right side,” he explained, tapping a finger at the darker half, and John nodded, though a sort of hesitant confusion still lingered in his face. “There’s the thumbs there, see?” he clarified, sliding his finger to hover just beneath a particularly pronounced patch of shading over the trachea. “And then the rest of the fingers were about here.” He gestured to a different spot further along the diagram, and John nodded again, much more definitive. “Lady Boddy’s measurements are even smaller than Irene’s, so she wouldn’t’ve had any trouble overpowering her.”

“But why the dismembering?” John asked, frowning, and Sherlock shrugged.

“Any number of reasons,” he replied, folding the paper back up and slipping it into his pocket. “Easier transport, perhaps. The body was found in two separate trunks. Maybe one would’ve been too heavy.”

“Or she didn’t think they’d both be found,” John offered, and Sherlock nodded, that also a good point.

Wait…had John just been…helpful?

John seemed to be having a similar epiphany, shaking his head dazedly up at Sherlock with glittering eyes. “Is this-Is this what you do all the time?” he asked, a touch breathless. “For the Yard?”

Hesitantly, Sherlock nodded, and John, far from looking repulsed and running away, only puffed out a breath, a faint smile on his face.

“Wow,” he murmured, smile broadening as he dropped his gaze. “That’s- Wow! That’s incredible, how do you- How did you even get into something like that?”

Sherlock blinked at him, brain grinding to a halt, and his mouth was left on its own, flapping over words he couldn’t control. “You-You don’t think it’s…weird?”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” John conceded with a shrug, “but somebody’s gotta do it, right? And you’re obviously good at it. I’d definitely want you on the case if I ever- And I’m just gonna leave that sentence unfinished so as not to jinx anything,” he muttered briskly, tossing in a grin, and Sherlock was startled into a laugh.

“I-I don’t- I just…called,” he answered, twitching a shoulder. “I was constantly bothering them with tips, and, eventually, they started calling me.” He slipped his hands into his pockets, shuffling his feet embarrassedly on the tile. “I mostly work with this one D.I., Lestrade. He’s the only one who calls me. Everyone else thinks I’m a bit of a freak.” He chuckled, scratching at the back of his neck, but John didn’t laugh, his expression turning to quite the opposite of amused.

“Do people really think that?” he asked, and, hesitantly, Sherlock nodded. John turned his eyes
away, glowering at the wall as his jaw twitched. “Well, you’re not a freak,” he answered fiercely, like he could wipe away every contrary word with his own, “and I’m sure they know that. They’re probably just bitter you can do their jobs better than they can.”

Sherlock chuckled, dropping his face as he felt it flush. “That’s what my mum says,” he murmured, and John smiled, suddenly soft as he tilted his head.

“Well, you know what they say about great minds,” he quipped, and Sherlock laughed, but the both of them quickly fell silent as footsteps could be heard crossing the foyer.

“Where could they have gone?” Harry said, and, in perfectly silent sync, Sherlock and John moved to press themselves against the side of the stairs, as far out of reach of the lamplight as they could manage.

“I don’t know!” Irene snapped, hands on her hips as she stepped into view. “Marisa said she talked to them in the library, and then no one’s seen them since.”

John turned from where he was crouched in front of him, a question in the tilt of his head as he waved a hand in gesture between them, and Sherlock nodded, confirming they were the topic of conversation.

“You think they bailed?” Harry asked, looking toward the door.

“Doubt it,” Irene replied, but she walked to the door regardless, cupping a hand to the window as she peered out into the dark. “Sherlock can never leave a puzzle unsolved, and, believe me, the whole of London will know when he solves it.”

John’s shoulders jerked with a stifled laugh, and Sherlock glared at the back of his head.

“Well, then where could they be?” Harry asked again, peering into the living room, her brow furrowed.

“Not a clue,” Irene shrugged, arms flipping out before wilting to her sides. “Ya think we should start checking closets?”

Harry’s laugh rang high and shrill in his ears as his stomach fell through the floor, John’s shoulders stiffening in front of him.

“I’m pretty sure they’re no longer—”

“Harry!”

“Irene!”

Sherlock startled, looking to where John had jumped up beside him, both of them interrupting the conversation at the exact same moment, leaping forward to intervene.

John blinked at him curiously, and then they both looked back to where the girls had yelped, clutching at their chests.

“Jesus!” Harry gasped, running a hand back through her hair. “What the hell, John!?”

“Sorry,” John muttered, moving up to meet her, Sherlock following in his wake. “I- You were looking for us?”

“Yes,” Irene snapped, pushing past Harry to glare at Sherlock, and, even as his chest constricted in a
fear he’d never admit to, he scowled back. “We came to get your alibis.”

“Our alibis?” John asked as Sherlock snorted.

“What are you asking us for?” he taunted, shaking his head at the brunette. “You wrote them all.”

“Yeah, well, I forgot yours,” she clipped, clearly having done nothing of the sort. Her eyes drifted past him, alighting on the table they had just been standing beside, the lamp still glowing, giving away their position. She smiled, eyebrows lifting. “Well, well,” she drawled, and Sherlock rolled his eyes to the ceiling, “someone’s been making progress. Found my little clue, did you?”

“Wait, hang on,” John interrupted, turning to point a finger between them. “How are you competing? Don’t you already know who the killer is?”

“I’m not really competing,” Irene replied, waving an airy hand, “I’m just going along with Harry.”

John snorted. “Yeah, and giving her all the answers.”

Irene opened her mouth, but it was Harry who spoke, scoffing loudly. “Answers!?” she spluttered, incredulous. “She’s been useless! Leading me in circles all night!”

“Can I help the layout of my parent’s main floor?” Irene sighed, and Harry rolled her eyes. “Now,” she chirped, turning back to Sherlock, sly smile on her lips, “I presume you have a few questions for me, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at her, hoping to be right just this once about her ability to read minds so she would know how fiercely he hated her, but he did have questions. “Where were you the night Lady Boddy was murdered?” he spat, and Irene grinned, triumphant.

“Well, it’s the oddest thing,” she mused, theatrically turning away from him and beginning a slow ambling pace over the tile. “I had… an appointment, if you know what I mean,” she added with a wink, directing it at John for some reason, “but he never showed.” She turned back on her heels, shrugging exaggeratedly. “First time customer too, and those always pay well.” She smiled, and John ducked his head, biting hard at his lip to stave off laughter.

Sherlock’s fingers cracked as they balled into fists. “Did this customer,” he bit, knowing Irene wouldn’t tolerate a break from character, “perhaps leave a name?”

“Hmm,” Irene hummed, lifting a gloved finger to her chin, and John had to physically turn around, hand clapped over his mouth. “You know, I don’t recall. He might’ve done. If he did, it would probably be in my book.”

“The little black one?” Sherlock muttered, John snorting as Irene glared. He sighed, rolling his eyes as he returned to the pantomime. “And where would this book be?” he asked, and Irene smiled, eyes glittering.

“In my purse,” she explained. “But, unfortunately,” she sighed, shrugging as though terribly distraught, “I seem to have misplaced it.”

Sherlock’s face fell flat. “Of course you have,” he deadpanned, and Irene grinned.

“Come along, Harry,” she chirped, moving to sling her arm through the blonde’s, Harry just shaking her head at her. “I have to get the hors d’oeuvres out of the kitchen.”
“And that’s my job how?” Harry snipped as they walked away.

“Which one of us is in the maid’s uniform?” Irene replied, and then promptly stumbled as Harry tried to trip her.

“Wait!” Sherlock called, lifting a hand, and the women stopped, turning curiously over their shoulders. “Are you, by any chance, right-handed, Ms. Adler?” he asked, brow quirking, and Irene smiled, slow and dangerous.

“Indeed, I am, Mr. Holmes,” she drawled. “Indeed, I am.” And, with that, they left, Irene fussing over the ideal temperature of spinach dip while Harry insisted nothing had ever mattered less.

“Well,” John said, arms crossed over his chest as he moved to Sherlock’s elbow, “I guess that settles it.”

“I guess it does,” Sherlock replied, staring at the spot the duo had disappeared from.

A beat of silence went by before John spoke again.

“So, shall we get the hell out of here?”

“Absolutely,” Sherlock replied, spinning back toward the living room, John laughing loudly as he followed.

“What are you doing?” he asked as they entered, Sherlock stepping around the sofa toward the fireplace. “Shouldn’t we gather everyone up? Reveal Irene’s a murderess and then haul ass before we have to eat spinach dip?”

“Everyone will be in here in a few minutes anyway for hors d’oeuvres,” Sherlock said, settling into one of the wingback chairs. “Might as well wait.”

John shrugged in acceptance, plucking his hat off and settling onto the sofa across from him as he pulled out his mobile. He bit on the corner of his lip as he frowned down at the screen in concentration, and Sherlock’s heart spiraled up into his throat before settling back down, his mind finally calming enough to completely panic.

John Watson. He’d been paired up with John Watson. And not completely blown it! Forget Halloween, this was practically Christmas!

“Hey, are you doing anything after this?” John asked, looking up a short second out of the tops of his eyes.

Sherlock’s heart stalled. “After the party?” he clarified, and John nodded. “No.”

“There’s a diner near campus—that American-style one, ya know?” he said, and Sherlock nodded mutely. “It’s open till, like, 3,” he murmured, shrugging as he tapped at his phone, his cheeks seeming to redden slightly in the firelight, but Sherlock couldn’t be sure. “If you wanna…you know…go.”

Sherlock swallowed, grateful that John’s eyes were glued to his mobile screen, although they didn’t appear to be reading anything. “Go?” he squeaked, and then immediately cleared his throat.

“Yeah,” John muttered, licking over his bottom lip before biting white over the spot. “Go. With me.” Sherlock blinked, silent long enough that John looked up, a twitch of a self-conscious smile on his
lips, and Sherlock was *lost*. “Okay,” he blurted, and John startled, head snapping up.

“O-Okay?” he stammered, mobile lowering forgotten to his lap.

Sherlock nodded, face burning with heat he hoped he could blame on the actual flames nearby, and John’s eyes flew wide for a blink before he smiled.

“Okay,” he chirped, teeth leaping out to bite down a grin as his eyes skittered away toward the door, but there was no denying the flush of his neck now.

Sherlock could feel his heart doing somersaults, pounding against his chest like a bell. He sucked his lips in tight over his teeth, trying to stamp down a sudden urge to laugh as he turned his face away, and then his eyes caught on something on a desk in the corner. Frowning, he tilted his head, and then stood, moving across the room.

“Sherlock?” John asked, turning in his seat to follow Sherlock’s progress. “What are you-”

“Irene’s bag,” Sherlock said, picking up the small black satin clutch. “Remember? She said she left it somewhere.”

There was a rustle of cloth as John stood behind him. “Oh, right. Well, you don’t really need to check it now,” he chuckled, shrugging as Sherlock turned curiously around to look at him. “I mean, you already know it’s her, right? And who *knows* what she’s hiding in there.” John waved a hand at the bag, trepidation in his blue eyes.

“The more evidence, the better,” Sherlock replied, snapping open the clutch.

There was nothing in it, really—a lipstick, a pen, and a miniature (black) book—and Sherlock plucked the book free, placing the purse back to the table as he skimmed through the dates. The pages blurred in front of him, names and scrawls flying by in a flipbook until he neared the day of Lady Boddy’s murder and slowed, turning one-by-one to the day in question. There, scrawled beneath the day in Irene’s swirling penmanship, was a single name.

“Mr. James?” Sherlock mused, frowning down at the page. “But that’s-” He stopped, blinking the ink blurry as his expression fell, chest frosting over. Slowly, he turned, eyes wide as he roved over John’s face, blue watching him warily. “Hamish,” he breathed, and John’s jaw set. “Scottish Gaelic. The English equivalent”—he lifted the notebook, pointing the page out toward the blond—“is James.”

John swallowed, looking between the page and Sherlock’s face. Suddenly, he let out a puff of nervous laughter, smile trembling as he lifted an arm, bracing it on the back of the sofa beside him. “Well,” he clipped, shrugging in a sharp spasm, “mystery solved.”

Sherlock’s arm fell to his side, book hanging limp as his eyes blinked frantically, gaze skittering around the room as the pieces fell into place. “You—You were seeing Lady Boddy,” he said, pointing out at John, who tilted his head, frowning. “All the time, you—But she wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t stop taking other clients or—*something*, so you—You called Irene Adler.” He began to pace, eyes wide and hands waving through the air in front of him, physically slotting the scene together. “Maybe Lady Boddy had mentioned her to you, mentioned the other brothel in town that was taking her business, and you knew, you *knew* Irene would have motive to kill her, to get her out of the way. So you made sure she wouldn’t have an alibi, set up an appointment you never intended to keep so she would be left without anyone to corroborate her story. And who would take the word of a prostitute, anyway; not up against a doctor. A doctor!” He spun around, pointing at John, who was looking equal parts stunned, concerned, and terrified. “I knew there was something about those cuts; I knew
it! They were all too clean, right along the joint. Irene wouldn’t know how to do that, but an army doctor used to cutting off limbs in the field,” he added, bobbing his head side-to-side to weigh the options.

“You do know I didn’t actually kill a prostitute, right?” John interjected, but Sherlock just waved him silent, the blond folding his arms and narrowing his eyes as the detective continued.

“You know your shoulder!” Sherlock shouted, startling John as he whirled around to point at him again. “It was your left shoulder! The card specifically mentions it was your left shoulder because you’re left-handed! The weakness in your left arm accounts for the anomaly in the bruising pattern, giving it the appearance that it was inflicted by a right-handed killer. And then, and then!” He resumed his pacing, breathing quick and ragged as his hands swirled in the air around him, a furious tornado.

“You get paired up with me! Me, the only person in this collection of imbeciles with even a prayer of piecing it together! Why? So you could keep an eye on the investigation, steer me the wrong direction! Distract me with your-your hair and your bloody cologne or shampoo or whatever that is—”

“My what now?”

“-when, all the while, you’re pushing me toward Irene Adler, helping me find the evidence you planted to make her look guilty!” He stopped, facing John from across the room, his chest heaving as air whistled in and out past his teeth.

John gaped at him, dumbstruck eyes blinking, and then, quite suddenly, his lips snapped shut, face creasing with frustration. “Okay, that was impressive as hell,” he snapped, jabbing a finger toward him, “and quite possibly the hottest fucking thing I have ever seen, but, just so we’re clear, I DIDN’T REALLY KILL ANYONE!”

Sherlock stilled, brain going suddenly calm as he caught something in John’s face, a slight pinch around his mouth and eyes. “But you did know you were going to be paired up with me,” he said softly.

John’s entire body seemed to draw in on itself, his hand curling back toward his chest as his eyes dropped off to the left.

All the air in Sherlock’s lungs left in a rush, the all-too-familiar taste of bitter disappointment settling stickily on his tongue. “Well,” he croaked, swallowing down at the floor, “at least you’re still on the winning team.”

John scoffed, shaking his head as he lifted it. “That isn’t why—”

“Isn’t it?” Sherlock interjected venomously, and John’s mouth fluttered open in affront.

“No, it isn’t!” he urged, and Sherlock sniffed, turning away toward the wall. “Yes, I asked Irene to pair me up with you, but not because I wanted to win! I didn’t know about the Yard, I had no idea you’d be so good at this. If I had, I probably wouldn’t have asked, because, you know, getting away with murder is always Plan A.”

“Then why?” Sherlock snarled, rounding back on him, but John didn’t retreat, his eyes only flashing in defiance. “Why would you want to work with me if it wasn’t to—”

“Because I like you!” John spat, and Sherlock was back on the playground in primary school, taking a punch to the stomach. “I-I saw you after the rugby game that one time, and I know we didn’t talk for very long, but- Well, I liked you.” He shrugged, shoes grinding into the carpet as he dropped his eyes to watch their progress. “And then I kept hanging out with Irene, hoping you’d
show up. Not that she’s not lovely, because she is,” he added, his palms lifting along with his eyes as
his hands bobbed in backtracking. “But you never did, and so, when she mentioned this party…” He
trailed away, mouth hovering open as his shoulders lifted higher and higher. “I just…thought I’d give
it a shot,” he muttered, arms falling again, and he slipped his hands into his pockets, rocking back
on his heels, his eyes fixed on the floor between them.

Sherlock could practically feel his brain starting to reboot, the vintage dialup internet tone playing in
his ears for some reason, and, once again, his mouth ran away on him. “You…like me?” he asked,
like an idiot, but, when John looked up, he smiled at him like he would never think he was anything
of the sort.

“Of course, I do,” he replied, eyes sparkling with warm mirth. “Quite a lot, too, it seems,” he
muttered, turning to bob his head back toward the sofa, where his bowler hat still rested on the
cushions. “I don’t wear something like that for just anyone.”

Sherlock chuckled, but it quickly grew to a laugh, all his doubt floating away from him with the
sound. “I dunno,” he mused, shrugging as he ambled a few slow steps closer, “the suit’s not bad.”

“No?” John quipped, smirking teasingly as he tilted his head. “Well, I think that deerstalker’s
growing on me.”

“Don’t say that,” Sherlock muttered, shaking his head, and John laughed, a light sound that sent a
shiver rushing up Sherlock’s spine.

“All right, fair enough,” the blond acquiesced, nodding. “The hats go. And, you know,” he
murmured, ducking his head again as he twitched a shoulder, “if-if you still want to…we could go
too.” He looked up at Sherlock through his lashes, sheepish smile twisting at his mouth. “To the
diner, I mean. Celebrate our victory.”

“Victory?” Sherlock questioned, tilting his head, and John’s brow creased warily. “You think I’m
turning you in?”

John stared at him a moment, and then laughed, a brief startled hitch of a sound. “Er, well, yeah,” he
said, shaking his head. “It’s kind of your job, isn’t it? Detective and all?”

“Consulting detective,” Sherlock amended, and John laughed, “and, really, that murder was so well
planned, I think you deserve to get away with it.”

“I did put in a lot of effort,” John insisted, nodding sagely before a grin broke through the somber
façade.

Sherlock smiled, dropping his head as he bit nervously at the inside of his cheek. “So...American
diner, huh?” he murmured, chancing a glance up at John through his lashes.

The boy beamed, eyes catching the fire, streaking the blue with orange and yellow, a sunset playing
out within his gaze. “American diner,” he affirmed with a nod, and Sherlock responded in kind.

“Alright then,” John chirped, turning toward the door. “Oh, wait,” he stalled, twisting back with
concern, “did you wanna do the whole reveal thing? Blame it on Irene or something? She’d probably
be flattered.”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head. “No, I-I think I can go,” he replied, his stomach twisting with
trepidation as a mischievous smirk slowly stretched over John’s face.

“Really?” he taunted, tipping his head. “You think you can go?”
Sherlock swallowed, resolutely not moving a single millimeter as John stepped closer.

“Don’t wanna stay for spinach dip? I hear it’s going to be the optimum temperature,” the blond continued, eyebrow quirking, and Sherlock chuckled, dropping his face.

“No, I- I don’t need-”

It was hard to say which came first, the hand cupped over his jaw and neck, or the lips on his own, but, either way, Sherlock’s brain melted in time with his knees.

John’s fingers twisted lightly in the curls protruding from the back of his hat, just enough to send a shudder through Sherlock’s shoulders, and he felt John smile against his mouth, Sherlock’s lips sluggishly responding as he recovered from the shock.

The rest of his body was still frozen, however, which was just as well, as Sherlock wouldn’t’ve had any idea what to do with his hands anyway, and, far too soon, John was pulling away, Sherlock’s eyes lingering closed as they breathed against one another’s mouths.

“Sorry,” John said, twirling through Sherlock’s curls once more before pulling away, Sherlock blinking his fuzzy face into focus, “wanted to get that in before you ditched the deerstalker.”

Sherlock chuckled, a breathy puff in the space between them. “Well, I-” he stammered, swallowing as he paused, heart racing. “I might...keep it. For a little while.”

John laughed, shaking his head at him. “For a little while?”

“For a little while,” Sherlock echoed, and John laughed harder.

“Well,” he said, lifting a hand, grazing along the hair curling out from the brim, “in that case.”

Sherlock’s stomach swooped, and so did his hat, John deftly snatching it off his head before rushing out of range.

He shoved the deerstalker onto his head, and then opened his eyes wide in mock surprise as he moved to take his coat from the rack. “I feel smarter already!” he gasped, mouth stretched open in wonder, and Sherlock rolled his eyes as he followed. “It’s the hat, isn’t it? The source of your power?”

“You’ve got me,” he deadpanned, and John grinned, swinging the door open and sweeping outside.

“I deduce,” he announced grandly, leaping down the steps before turning back to where Sherlock was just closing the door behind him, “that it’s freezing.”

“Perfectly sound assessment,” Sherlock replied with a nod as they headed toward apparently John’s car, considering the boy had removed keys and was now twirling them around his fingers theatrically.

“I also deduce,” he added, thrusting a finger into the air, “that you”—he dropped his finger, tapping it against Sherlock’s arm—“like me a little bit too.”

Sherlock did his absolute best to press his smile flat, but he could feel it tingling at his lips, an irrepressible manifestation of the fireworks in his chest. “Really?” he asked, frowning at the hat on John’s head. “Must be faulty,” he muttered, and, as John scoffed, moving to swat at him, Sherlock reached up, grabbing his hand and intertwining their fingers before returning their arms to swing at their sides.
And John, after a beat, gripped back.

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