In Clear View

by theSeventhStranger

Summary

John and Mary, domestic bliss? Since the baby came, John hasn't seen Sherlock in far too long.

One night, after a few too many drinks at the pub, John decides to make a surprise visit to 221B Baker Street. How will he react when he discovers that Sherlock has a boyfriend?..?

Post Season 3 Fix-It. Explicit M/M sexual content.

Written in frustration over Season/Series 3. Aiming for a true-to-life, realistic storyline.

Developing John/Sherlock, and of course, an Eventual Happy Ending!
It was John’s first night out since Anna had been born. The clinic staff was meeting up at the pub one Friday night each month, but John hadn’t joined them for three months now. It had all just been so insanely stressful, more than he ever could have imagined.

When he would come home to an exhausted Mary, she'd usually just greet him with a short ”here,” handing over Anna to him and then heading right into the shower where she would stay for a long time. But Mary had encouraged him to go out tonight, saying he deserved a night out on the town.

It was early June, and the soft scents of summer and warm asphalt lingered in the evening sun. The streets were crowded with dressed up people, slight excitement in the air, the usual Friday evening buzz. Oh, it was good being back in town-

John really had a hard time adjusting to the suburban lifestyle.

Endless nights in watching the telly or going to barbecues with awful dreadful boring people- John smiled when he remembered Sherlock’s mocking words at his speech at the wedding. He’d been right of course, as always.

He stepped inside the pub and squinted his eyes trying to spot his colleagues in the dark.

”John!” a voice called out. Nigel, the clinic's pediatrician, was waving his hand from a table in the corner. ”It’s about bloody time you broke free for a night,” he said with a laugh and a rough pat on the back as John joined them. There were about eight people there from work, and someone quickly shoved a cool pint into John’s hand.

”So, how about that hobby detective work you were doing before?” Richard, one of the other doctors, had a slight smirk on his face.

John felt the usual pang in his chest, the way he always felt when someone asked him about Sherlock and he had to answer.

”Nah, not really agreeing with family life.” John tried his best to make it sound like it didn’t matter. Tried to laugh it off, like the others did. He hadn’t seen Sherlock in more than two months now, and it hurt like hell just to think about.

When Mary and Anna were home from the hospital, Sherlock had surprised them all - and probably himself, too - by actually accepting the invitation to come over, John had been so sure he’d decline.

Babies, not really my area- But instead he had not only accepted, but had been making a significant effort to be nice when he was over, being so friendly, laughing with Mary, complementing her looks even (Motherhood suits you Mary, you look wonderful), not a trace of the usual condescension in his voice.

He’d brought two gigantic Harrods shopping bags full of gifts for Anna, and John got a weird sense that Sherlock had actually enjoyed picking out the presents for her. He hadn’t spoken much with John though, had barely looked at him to be honest. It had felt a bit awkward, although John really couldn’t pin down why.

There was really nothing strange at all with having your best mate over to your house, meeting your wife and newborn baby. The most normal thing in the world, actually. And yet he somehow
had felt guilty, like showing off his family was hurting Sherlock.

Ridiculous, he’d tried to tell himself. Sherlock and he had been friends, sure, very close friends and John was certain they’d always remain that way. Maybe they wouldn’t see each other as often, but that was certainly normal too, right? Life changes. Simple as that.

"Must have been like a childhood dream come true, eh! Being the serious doctor in the daytime and kicking the ass of bad guys at night. A proper Clark Kent/Superman set up!" Richard laughed out loud, pleased with his own metaphor.

John forced a smile. "Yeah, quite so."

More beer, then someone put a tray of shots down on the table.

What the hell, John thought and in quick succession poured the first and second and third shot down his throat. Anna had just turned three months old, and was sleeping significantly better at night, which made it so much easier to leave Mary on her own with the baby for a night. He’d have to make it up to her tomorrow though, but it was worth it. It was just nice to be out, chatting and laughing with his colleagues like old times.

Someone was getting to the punchline in a story about a patient from last week:

"…and then I had to tell the old geezer, Sir, I said, put your clothes back on please, you do not need to be naked to get a throat culture!" and John laughed with the others until his abs started to hurt.

When John got up to use the lavatory, he wobbled into the table and almost tipped over a glass of wine. He realized he was clearly drunk, more so than he had expected. The result of sleep deprivation and no drinking for a long time, he managed to think while he swayingly made his way to the loo.

Okay, definitely pissed. Room spinning. After washing his hands, John walked up to the bar and quickly downed three large glasses of water, then decided it would probably be best to head home. He said a quick goodbye to everyone and stepped outside. It felt good with the cool air hitting his face, much better already. Maybe walking for a bit would do him good, before getting in a taxi. Did not want to come home like this, knew how Mary would taunt him about it.

Walking when drunk, good. Fresh air, good.

The hours in the pub had passed so quickly, and now it was almost midnight. Although he definitely felt more sober now, he was still swaying a bit when he walked.

John wandered around aimlessly for over an hour, just looking at the people out, taking in the sounds and sights and the energy that only a big city could offer, already feeling much better. Man, how he loved London. And then he realized where his feet had been leading him.

Baker Street. How silly.

Granted, he was still a little bit drunk but he surely remembered that he didn't live there anymore.

"I don’t live here anymore,” he said out loud, and suddenly felt like he wanted to cry. My God, he really had to get a grip on himself, all kinds of weird thoughts and emotions running wild this evening apparently.

He knew he should just get in a taxi and leave, but.. standing there at Baker Street, it felt impossible not to wonder about that one particular flat at 221B. Was Sherlock home? John knew he
had been very busy, dealing with that horrible Did you miss me?-scenario after Christmas.
Sherlock had asked if John wanted to help, but at the time it had just been impossible, with the
imminent birth of the baby and all.

It had been so strange, to not be by Sherlock’s side this time. He had tried to keep in touch with
texts, trying to suggest meeting up for lunch or a coffee once in a while, but knew all too well that
that is not how one keeps up with Sherlock Holmes. He had needed to be there, but couldn’t.

He had made the only choice he felt was morally justifiable. But still, how he misses to be a part of
Sherlock’s life.

He also worries about Sherlock, living alone again. John had taken upon himself, with no small
amount of pleasure, to help Sherlock with all those mundane but important things that his genius
flatmate so easily ignored. Like eating. And sleeping. And attending to various wounds and
scratches. Wonder how he was doing now?

John walked closer until he found himself standing on the sidewalk right across the flat. He looked
up the windows facing the street, and saw that there were some lights on in the sitting room.
Sherlock was home, and although it was late, John knew for certain that this man hardly ever went
to sleep before three or four o’clock in the mornings.

His heart was beat a little faster, and he considered taking out his phone to send a text. Then a
thought struck him. What if he surprised Sherlock instead?

He still had the key (had felt too dramatic to return it, like breaking up or something, how silly, and
Sherlock had never asked for it back), and if he managed to climb the stairs quietly enough, maybe
he could sneak in and make a good scare out of it.

John smiled. He could picture how Sherlock would first be all mad for a second and then break out
laughing in that happy, relaxed way that he sometimes did when John had managed to catch him
off guard. Oh how he missed hearing that laugh.

Fueled by the alcohol still buzzing in his blood, clouding his judgement, John put the key in the
lock and turned.

The door opened and closed without a sound, and John proceeded to ever so slowly take one step
at the time, slowly approaching the inner door. He could see light trickling down from the flat and
onto the staircase, clearly Sherlock hadn’t bothered to close the door properly. He would have to
have a word with Sherlock about this; there had to be some limit to the unnecessary risks he was
going to expose himself to.

With only two more steps to go, John froze at a sound coming from inside the flat. He listened
attentively, body pressed against the wall of the staircase. It was absolutely quiet in the hallway as
well as in the flat, no music, hardly any street noise slipping in, just the sound he had just heard.

What was that? He waited and listened. There it was again. And again. From a turned down TV
perhaps, he wondered, then reminded himself that Sherlock never watched the telly voluntarily.

No, this was… a human sound, must be from Sherlock, almost like.. like a whimper somehow,
yeah, like a very quiet whimper. Had Sherlock fallen asleep on the sofa, was he having a
nightmare? Or, and his pulse picked up speed at the thought, was Sherlock hurt in some way? Was
he in pain, and was that why he was making those sounds?

Suddenly feeling much more sober, John tip-toed the remaining steps and leaned forward to peak
through the crack in the door. And then his body froze in place, his mind simultaneously blanked for a moment.

_Because oh my god oh my god oh my god._

His eyes had immediately detected Sherlock, sitting slouched down in his usual chair, head leaned back against the backrest, eyes half closed, arms slung loosely behind his head, and oh fucking hell was this really happening. Because in front of Sherlock, kneeled down on the rug, was another man, his forearms bracing on Sherlock’s thighs, his head bent down, moving slightly. And there was no way for John to misunderstand what he was observing.

_Oh fucking hell._

Standing absolutely still, protected by the darkness of the staircase, John could not stop staring at the sight in front of him. He felt like a deer caught in the oncoming headlights of a car, frozen, mind racing, brain not fully willing to take in the signals the eyes were transmitting. Sherlock was having sex. With a man.

John realized that while he was stunned by the first fact, he was not at all surprised by the latter, no really it was more like a confirmation of something he had intuitively understood but not been willing to think about.

Close friends as they had been, they had never talked about sexual preferences or relationships, well not if you didn’t count that horribly awkward conversation the first night, at Angelo’s.

_You wanted to have him then_, an annoying voice in the back of his mind whispered. _Should have seized the chance..._

No. "Married to his work." That was what he'd said. What a load of crap.

It had been so easy to put the thoughts about Sherlock’s eventual sexuality out of his mind, back then. Tried not to think about it, figured that most likely Sherlock wasn’t into sex at all, probably way to messy and undignified for him, to pathetically human, and far beneath his great, logical mind. And Sherlock had certainly never volunteered any kind of information pertaining to that particular area.

So they had just gone about their daily lives, Englishmen as they were, tactfully avoiding to talk about all things that threatened to become uncomfortably private. But here now, in front of John, was evidence as good as it gets that his assumptions had been wrong.

Slowly adjusting from the initial shock and disbelief, John started to take in more of what he was seeing. Who _is_ that bloke? he wondered, curious but simultaneously annoyed with the burning feeling of jealousy that shot through him. _No reason to be jealous. Embarrassed, yes. Jealous, no._

The light in the flat was low, only a few lamp lights were lit, and the warm glow from a dying fire in the fireplace. Some light from the street lamps fell though the windows and cast long shadows on the walls.

John could not make out much of the man busy servicing Sherlock, but he appeared to be of Sherlock’s age or a bit younger. Average height probably, fairly muscular body, hair golden and slightly wavy, dressed in a light blue, immaculately pressed shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. The elbows that were currently pressed flat on Sherlock’s thighs.

The man had black trousers, similar to the ones Sherlock usually wore. Shiny black leather shoes, John could see the soles, looked like expensive shoes although John was certainly no expert. A city
boy, John guessed, a banker, or perhaps a lawyer.

Sherlock was in his blue dressing gown, but it was untied and open in front, he had one of his usual thin t-shirts on and it was pulled up to his chest, revealing Sherlock’s well defined abdominal muscles underneath pale, almost hairless skin. *And what else, what else?*

John strained to see, had to see more, had to know even though he also felt acutely aware that he should immediately turn away and sneak out while he still had the opportunity. To be caught out here would be, well, mortifying was too weak of a word. Sherlock would never speak to him again.

*Oh Christ.* Sherlock’s breathing had become more audible, John could hear the his every breath, now faster, with a small sigh of “oh” on each exhale. And when John tilted his head slightly, he could see Sherlock from another angle and noticed that, as expected, he was naked from the waist down, moving his hips ever so slightly.

Where are his pyjama bottoms, John wondered, and then noticed them in a little pile on the floor by the chair, scrunched up together with a pair of blue silk pants. The guy was working Sherlock thoroughly it seemed. He was moving his hands now, one hand below his mouth, helping to add some extra stability and friction surely, and with his other hand, he started to stroke Sherlocks stomach, and then reaching up under the t-shirt, over his chest, maybe pinching his nipples, John guessed, or did guys perhaps not do that to each other? John felt confused.

Like an answer to his question, a second later Sherlock’s whining sounds turned into something more decisive, something more like small grunts. “Ah ah ah,” he was saying, still in a half whispering voice but a bit darker and definitely more insistent, his hands suddenly lowered and combing through the guy’s hair, almost but not quite holding his head.

*Sensitive nipples then,* John registered, almost unaware of his own thoughts.

”Ah, yes, keep going,” he heard Sherlock say. And then, with something that resembled shock, John realized he was getting hard. He was hiding in a doorway, watching his best friend getting sucked off by another man, and getting an erection from it. *Oh shit, John Watson, what the hell are you doing—*

*It certainly looks like this guy knows his stuff.* John thought and then immediately hated it and tried to push it away. When was the last time he had gotten a blow job? He couldn’t really remember. Before the baby, definitely. Maybe that reunion night with Mary after Christmas day?

The women he’d been with, Mary included, usually saw a blow job like something of a chore, a favor to be distributed on rare and special occasions, or to be used as a sort of currency or a way of apologizing for something. John had always been very happy to accept, regardless of the underlying reason, but it occurred to him that this, this thing he was witnessing, well.

This guy didn't actually seem to mind. On the contrary, he looked like he quite liked it. He was starting to make small sounds now to as well, a sort of humming, while not losing focus from his task at hand. *Maybe gay men could enjoy this in another way?*

Next thought: *Could he himself also enjoy getting blown by a man?* He was actually not 100% innocent on the area of man-to-man sex, although he had always considered himself completely straight.

But in the army, down in Afghanistan, well he’d had his share of lonely, miserable nights, and yes, once in a while he had caved in to the invitation to a mutual wank with another soldier. He had
tried not to think too hard about that, since. Chalked it up to normal human psychology, the need for closeness and comfort, a moment’s distraction from the realities of war. Not gay! But now he wondered.

In a vivid mental image, not just any man popped up, but Sherlock. He visualized Sherlock, on his knees in front of John in his chair, sucking him off. He saw himself stroking his hands through Sherlock’s soft dark curls, gripping them, guiding his movements and setting the pace. Imagined what Sherlock would be able to do with that usually so poisonous tongue of his.

John felt himself getting painfully hard, a tight strain towards his jeans. Oh God. He had to really watch his own breathing now, could not risk being heard.

His mind continued to race off on crazy tangents, far away to since long forbidden, locked-up places. It presented him with an internal picture of himself going down on Sherlock, mimicking what this guy was doing. Taking him in his mouth and being the one who could make him emit all these sounds. The intimate taste of another man.

Could he manage that? Could he even like that? He was surprised to find that the quiet voice within him replied a calm, assured Yes.

There were other sounds now, as well. Mingled with the heavy breathing and the loader moans were also the unmistakable wet sounds of a mouth and of motion, faster now than before. Of suction and licking and body fluids mixing together. Filthy, dirty sounds, pure sex.

This was almost more than John could bear. And then something even worse happened.

Without warning, the guy stopped. He pulled his mouth off Sherlock with a sudden move, causing Sherlock to speak up in a hoarse, almost desperate, voice, No no what are you doing, don’t stop, I’m so close-

The guy straightened up a bit and then got up on his feet. For a moment, John felt sick with fear, thinking he had been discovered and that the guy would be heading towards the door.

But instead the man quickly got rid of his shoes and socks, unfastened his belt, and then continued to climb up on the chair, smiling, straddling Sherlock, wrapped his arms around him and kissed him.

Sherlock smiled back, big grin, then leaned forward and kissed him back. Not a chaste little peck, this; no, this was a wet, sloppy, tongue against tongue sort of kiss, John knew one when he saw one.

But there was also something else in this kiss, and it was that thing that made John’s gut twist. Love. There was love in this kiss.

Love in the way the guy put his arms around Sherlock, and what was worse, love in the way that Sherlock cupped his hands around the guy’s face when he kissed him back.

Up until this point, John had assumed that whoever he was, this stranger in Sherlock’s - and John’s! - flat, was just an aberration, someone who would leave after this and never come back, someone Sherlock had picked up that night (what, wait, Sherlock’s picking up random guys now, that’s not who he is). But he could see it more clearly now.

This was not a one night stand he was the secret witness to, no. This was not the first time, and Sherlock and the guy, who ever he was, were not strangers. There was something too intimate in
the way they interacted, and something too unhurried and relaxed in the way they were kissing.

A blind, raging jealousy now roamed freely in John’s chest. His heart beat like crazy, he couldn’t breathe. For a second he considered storming in and throwing this intruder out, hard, head first down the stairs, one little push and off you pop, but surely that wouldn’t please Sherlock. But oh how it hurt now-

*How had this happened?*

It was supposed to be John and Sherlock, Sherlock and John, *just the two of us against the rest of the world*, he remembered Sherlock’s teasing words, spoken on that night of his miraculous return.

This was all so wrong! He felt trapped in some sort of hazy bubble, and then, a sudden realisation hit him like a blow to the head:

*I am in love with Sherlock. And I’ve fucked up my chances.*

John felt lightheaded, like he was fainting.

*I’m not his date, I’m not gay, I’m not his bloody boyfriend...* It had been right in front of him, all those years. And now he wondered; if he just hadn’t been so goddamn uptight about it all - could Sherlock have been his?

*I wasted the best thing I’ve ever had-*

For the second time this night, John wanted to cry.

Aided by the adrenaline rush and the wave of emotions, John tore himself away from the flat, his every step down the staircase a massive effort to remain undetected. It had begun to rain, a warm summer night drizzle. He stumbled away from Baker Street, still dizzy, but this time not from alcohol.

In the taxi on his way back home, he rested his forehead against the cool window as the car was making its way out through the streets, through the people leaving the pubs and restaurants, his eyes staring blankly as if he had been hypnotised; the scenario he had seen and its implications on repeat, a thunderstorm in his mind.
Chapter 2

A prominent sense of unreality held John in an iron grip throughout the following days. His mind was constantly fixed on Sherlock, on the other bloke, on his own reactions to it all, and on the truths about himself that he had previously clung so tightly to. On Mary and Anna and on how he had gotten himself into this situation.

On Saturday, the day after the pub, he had stubbornly ignored his hangover to spend hours walking briskly around the neighborhood with the stroller; Anna rocked comfortably to sleep by the fast pace and the fresh summery air. John was mulling over everything again and again, trying to align his thoughts in a way that would make sense.

It was as if all the emotions and thoughts that he had been blocking out ever since Sherlock died and then came back, now suddenly had broken free and were flooding him. John felt as if he was treading water to keep his head above the surface.

He had a hard time acting normal around Mary. He worried, irrationally, that she would be able to read his thoughts just by looking at him, just like Sherlock would have, and John tried to stay away from her as much as he could. But on Saturday evening, there was no escape from sitting down together to have dinner, Anna at long last asleep in her crib.

"You’ve hardly told me anything about last night,” Mary said at the dinner table, causing John’s heart to jump. "How the hell did you manage to get that pissed?"

She laughed, a kind laugh and John tried to look relaxed when he smiled back. Before he could reply, she continued:

"You know, I talked to Kate, Richard’s wife, earlier today and she said Richard was home before midnight. And that you had left the pub before him. But you, John… you didn’t get in until almost 2:30 in the morning? I’m just curious, that’s all.”

She peered inquisitively at him from across the table and over the lit candles. John silently panicked, tried to not look away or act guilty, all while his mind, in a most unhelpful way, kept providing him with various pornographic images from last night’s events. He made a point of finishing to chew his last bite of the roast.

"Yes, I know, I know, I’m an idiot, what can I say.” He forced a short laugh. "Really bloody embarrassing, my age, to get hammered like a teenager. It was Nigel’s shots that did me in. And then I just walked around to sober up before I went home. Didn’t want you to have two babies to look after.”

Mary raised her brows. "John Watson, you know better than to wander the streets like that when you’re drunk. You could have been mugged! Attacked! Murdered even! You’re a father now, do try to be a bit more responsible.”

She averted her gaze, a displeased expression on her face, then turned back to look John straight in the eye. She kept her gaze for a second or two, a faint smile curving her lips but there was a thoughtful look in her eyes.

"More wine, honey?” she asked. "I think it might do you good.”
There had been some new detective series that Mary had wanted them to watch, but thankfully she had fallen asleep on the sofa just fifteen minutes in. John spread a blanket over her, turned the telly off, and made his way upstairs. He took a quick look to see that Anna was doing alright in her crib, and then went into the upstairs bathroom, locking the door behind him.

It was a great relief to finally be on his own, alone with his spinning mind. He got out of his clothes and stepped into the shower, exhaling as the hot water enclosed him.

As he relaxed, he let his thoughts drift in ways he had never previously allowed. Straight or gay, there was no denying that Sherlock was beautiful. Those cheekbones that John used to admire. Those soft curls framing his face, contrasting his pale complexion. Cat-like eyes and cat-like behavior, too, John had often thought. Unpredictable.

That thin but strong body, like a roman statue. Those slender hands that could dissect a cadaver without a tremble but also play the violin so beautifully it brought tears to your eyes. His lips… his lips that looked so soft and probably would feel really nice to taste…

John pictured Sherlock on the sofa, sleeping. He imagined leaning over him to brush his lips against Sherlock’s, waking him up.

*Sherlock smiles, his body all warm and pliant from sleep, and he puts his arms around John and pulls him down on top of him. John supports some of his weight on his lower arms but leans the rest on Sherlock, pressing him down, kissing him deeper. He feels Sherlock’s tongue make contact with his own, they taste each other for a while, and then John moves down to kiss him on the neck, biting and sucking his earlobe.*

At this he pictured Sherlock moaning, remembering the sounds he had made last night. He took his erection in his hand, leaning back against the cool tiles in the shower.

He’d never before allowed himself to have sexual thoughts about a man. Sometimes, before the fall, when he still lived at Baker Street, his mind would try to throw Sherlock into his masturbatory fantasies, but John had always pushed those thoughts away with force. *Not gay!*

Now, the floodgates were opened and John was too exhausted to fight it anymore. Hell, he didn’t even want to fight it. He tightened his grip, flicked his thumb over the head and shuddered at the sensation.

His mind went back to Sherlock again, him and Sherlock on the sofa. *He unties Sherlock’s dressing gown and starts to kiss further down, until he is licking his left nipple with a pointed tongue while rolling and pinching the right one between his index finger and his thumb. Sherlock lets out a moan that goes straight to John’s erection, and John starts to rock his hips against Sherlocks’. John feels Sherlock’s hard cock pushing back up against his own, and suddenly they’re not wearing any clothes.*

*He watches as Sherlock takes them both in his hand and starts to stroke in a sensual, burning rhythm, both of them slick with precome. Sherlock is whispering John’s name again and again. John is half sitting, half laying on top of Sherlock, his hands squeezing Sherlock’s muscly chest and shoulders, and John leans down, their lips and tongues meeting hungrily.*

*John moves his hand in between their lips, and presses two fingers into Sherlock’s mouth, their cocks still rubbing together in Sherlock’s grip. Sherlock quickly takes the hint and begins to suck John’s fingers, pressing his tongue against them as John lets his fingers push further in. He*
watches Sherlock lean his head back, eyelids fluttering, so turned on by having John’s fingers fuck his mouth.

And then Sherlock moves and now they are standing up, John is leaning against the wall with his hands stroking over Sherlock’s shoulders, and Sherlock gets down on his knees, taking John in his mouth. Sherlock starts to do the exact same thing with his tongue again but now it’s John’s cock in his mouth, and it is sliding in and almost all the way out, and then back in again.

Sherlock holds him there and sucks hard, swallows him down, his tongue extending flat underneath John’s hardness, and John can’t hold back anymore, and he comes in long, hard strokes right down Sherlock’s throat. He swallow most of it but John can see some of his semen making a small trail down from the corner of Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock smiles and wipes it with his thumb and then licks it off—

John’s knees were too weak to support him any longer, and he slid down against the tiles until he was sitting, shaking all over, gasping for breath, warm water still splashing over his head, and he hoped he hadn’t made any noises that Mary could have heard.

Oh Christ help me.

John got out, dried himself up and stumbled into bed, falling asleep within seconds.

That night, John was consumed by a fitful dream in which Sherlock had been kidnapped by some golden-haired man in a suit, it was Moriarty only it was not, and he was going to take Sherlock away to Eastern Europe in a private jet plane. Sherlock was texting John to come to his aid. “Help me John. Please. SH” the text said, but John couldn’t because Mary had locked him up inside their bedroom closet.

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Sunday, Monday and Tuesday went by in a blur. John performed his tasks at the clinic in a robot-like mode, and many times found himself staring blankly at the computer screen in front of him, unwritten records and referrals piling up at an alarming speed. He thought about how Sherlock had gone missing in action from his life the last months.

Earlier, he had assumed it had to do with Sherlock’s work, but now he wondered if that bloke was the real reason. Still, Sherlock could not possibly know about John’s recent, er, change of heart, so why would he need to avoid him?

John was also contemplating his next move. He didn’t really know exactly what he wanted to happen, at this point. Even if he managed to get that bloke out of the picture (which he was fairly certain he would) - then what about Mary? And what about his daughter? Divorce? Part time Dad? Concepts too strange to take in right now.

John had tried, albeit half-heartedly, to be honest with himself about these realities, but it was as if his brain couldn’t sustain the difficult thoughts for long enough to reach some kind of conclusion.

It was all so very, very complicated. All he knew for certain was the mad desire, the overwhelming need to be with Sherlock. He could not stop thinking about him, it had taken priority over all other thoughts and emotions. Perhaps if he could only see him, everything else would just naturally fall into place?

On Wednesday, sitting by his desk on his lunch break, John couldn’t hold back any longer. He
picked up his phone and started to type.

"It’s been too long. Dinner Friday night?"

He pressed send, then spent two hours checking his phone every thirty seconds. Finally it chimed. He had tried to brace himself for yet another excuse, but his heart still sank when he saw that it was just that.

"In BXL, Mycroft made me go. Will likely be back mid month. SH"

John reread the text and felt grateful for the slight opening at the end. Better than nothing. He wrote:

"So maybe in two weeks then?"

The reply was instant this time.

"Sure. I will text you when I’m back. SH"

John wrote back:

"Great."

He looked at the screen, and then, in a moment of boldness added,

"I miss you".

He pressed send before he had a chance to delete it.

There was no reply, not for hours, but just as John had switched of his computer and was getting ready to leave the clinic, his phone chimed again. He tore it out of his pocket.

"When convenient, please mail keys to Baker St. SH"

John’s hands were starting to shake. The keys to Baker Street. Was it possible that Sherlock knew John had been there? After a moment of trying to not freak out, John decided that that was, if not impossible, so at least improbable. Even taking into account that it was Sherlock he was dealing with here. John knew he had kept extremely quiet, and Sherlock had clearly been, er, distracted at the time.

But why then did he ask for the keys back, when he hadn’t mentioned them once since John moved out? Then it dawned on him. The bloke. The keys were for him.

John felt like hitting someone.

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Every minute John had to himself - on the bus to work, on his coffee break, in the shower (Mary had commented with a smirk the long time that John had started to spend in there), in bed at night when Mary was asleep - John let his thoughts go to Sherlock.

Sometimes, he ruminated about what was happening, tried to sort out what he was going to do, never really finding any answers. And sometimes (okay, often), he indulged in the sexual fantasies.
He had gotten bolder now, both in his imagination and in real life - he had begun to use his phone to watch gay porn, all the while terrified that Mary would see it or that his phone would suddenly combust due to some nasty virus or something. So far though, so good.

For once, John felt uncharacteristically out of his depth, unexperienced, so unlike the rather strong confidence he had acquired over the years regarding his skills as a lover. But what John lacked in ability, he figured he could make up in effort. That was how he had gotten through Med School, and that was how he dealt with every challenge that life sent his way.

John was a hard working and persistent man, refusing to be defeated. It was those traits that had made him so successful in the army, as well. John Watson was not one to give up.

On Thursday the following week, John texted Mike Stamford to ask if he wanted to meet up for lunch. He was desperate to find out more about what was going on with Sherlock, and Mike would probably have at least some small bit of information. They met at the sandwich place close to the hospital, took their food to go and went to sit down in the park nearby.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, and John took off his cardigan and enjoyed the sun warming his face. Mike seemed to be in good shape, he had lost a little bit of weight and was telling John that he had finally found a work out that he actually could stand (cycling).

John tried to appear as relaxed as he could when he answered Mike’s questions about Anna and Mary and life in the ‘burbs, all the while thinking about how to best ask about Sherlock, but then Mike brought the subject up.

"So, I take it you aren’t helping Sherlock with his cases anymore? Must be weird, after all that the two of you have been through together."

John felt a wave of gratitude. Mike was a good friend.

"I haven’t seen him in over two months actually… and yes, it does feel weird.” John looked down to the ground, kicked some gravel around with his foot. "I’ve been trying to get him to meet up for a long time now, but he’s never available.” He smiled faintly, shrugged, then looked up at Mike again.

"Mike, I need to ask you something. You know, I sort of get the feeling that Sherlock is avoiding me. It’s like I’ve done something that pissed him off, but I just can’t figure out what. You see him now and then at Bart’s, don’t you?"

Mike nodded, and John continued.

"Do you have any idea of what this could be about? Why he’s acting this way?"

Mike suddenly looked flushed, his cheeks turning slightly more pink than usual.

"John…” he began. "I know you lived with Sherlock for a long time, and I don’t want to make it sound like I know him better than you, Lord knows I don’t. In fact, I hardly understand a thing about what goes on in that man’s brain.” He chuckled, then paused, searching for words.

"But, John… did you and Sherlock ever talk about, you know, relationships and stuff?"
"Relationships?" John echoed, starting to feel a bit uncomfortable even though this was exactly what he wanted to talk about. "Well I guess it wasn’t exactly The Doctor Phil-show at Baker Street, if you know what I mean."

Mike laughed.

"No, I can see how that wouldn’t be the case. But, well, did he ever.. did you talk about… did he ever approach the subject of…"

Mike stumbled on his words, cheeks now even pinker, then threw his hands up in the air in a defeated gesture. "Oh what the fuck John. What I’m trying to say is this: Did Sherlock ever tell you he.. you know. Swings the other way?"

Now it was John’s turn to blush like a school girl.

"Ah, um, wow." He nervously cleared his throat. "No, to be honest, he didn’t. Well, he did say once, long time ago, that girlfriends were not really his area and that he considers himself married to his work. But that was all."

Mike looked at him with a mildly resigned expression.

"But", John continued, "I guess I kind of knew that anyway. I just, er, didn’t really put too much thought into the matter. It never… came up."

John felt like his face was burning up. He wondered if Mike knew about his feelings, then decided he couldn’t possibly. John was newly wedded, after all, and the father of a beautiful little baby girl. A perfectly well adjusted family man. The obsessive thoughts he was having about Sherlock were surely not written all over him. It just felt that way.

Mike drew a deep breath. "You know John, maybe this is completely unrelated to whatever is going on between the two of you. But the reason I’m telling you this is that I’ve also noticed Sherlock acting differently, these last couple of weeks. And it seems to keep getting worse. Molly sees it as well, and as you know, she’s a lot more perceptive than me about these things."

John collected himself before asking. "About which things?"

"John, I feel odd just saying this, because it’s so out of character for him, but… I think Sherlock’s in love."

"In love?" John was struggling to keep a straight face in front of Mike now.

"And I.. it was Molly who pointed it out to me… we think he might have a.. what’s the proper word for it… a boyfriend."

"A boyfriend?" John repeated, feeling intensely that he wanted this conversation to be over, but at the same time desperately wanting to hear every detail that Mike could provide.

"So I’m thinking. Maybe Sherlock just doesn’t know how to tell you, especially seeing that you two never even talked about… stuff like this. Maybe that’s why he’s avoiding you?" Mike raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Like I said, I’m only guessing here, John."

"Hm." John didn’t know what to say. His mind was running on high gear now, jealousy and regret mixing together with this new information. It confirmed what he had suspected, but it also added to it all in a bad way.
He turned to Mike again. "What do you mean, that it keeps getting worse?"

"Well, it’s just so unlike him. He’s behaving odd, for being Sherlock, that is. Suddenly he’s almost… nice-ish. He said 'thank you’ when Molly brought him coffee. He didn’t yell bloody murder when a lab technician dropped a beaker. And I almost forgot - you’re going to love this, John! The other day, he was in the lab using the microscope, and - brace yourself - he was actually humming along with the radio!"

"What?" John said, not really believing this last piece of information. "To the classical station I take it? Was it Wagner?"

"No, that’s the thing! It was that Love Hits station that Molly likes! Told you he’s gone quite mad!"

John felt sick. He also felt a bit like a bull facing a matador, the red flag waving in front of him.
Chapter 3

Strong gusts of wind were rattling the bedroom windows of the Knightsbridge flat. The alarm clock on the nightstand showed 03:17, solid darkness still outside. Sherlock was propped up against the plush headboard, his face bathed in the blueish light from the open laptop that was resting on his thighs.

The screensaver was running, it was a computerized illustration of protein folding. On the screen, a long green string was slowly morphing into a three-dimensional structure, rotating around itself, now completely assembled into its native state.

Sherlock had a bit of a hard time adjusting to spending the night away from Baker Street, which made it more difficult than usual to go to sleep. His flat had been his sanctuary for so long, and even though this place was, objectively, much nicer in every way, and bigger and had two bathrooms and even a terrace overlooking Hyde Park, it still wasn’t easy.

In his mind, his brother appeared, sniggering. You’re such a baby Sherlock, just like when Mummy had to come get you from summer camp-

It was beginning to get better, though, and of course in a way, he liked this place too. What with the porters in the lobby bringing up his shirts from the dry cleaner, and that oversized bathtub he could easily stretch out in, and the built in coffee machine in the kitchen.

And it wasn’t as if he had moved in or something, he still went to Baker Street almost every day to work and to unwind, and when Gabriel was traveling or Sherlock was on a case, he would spend all his available time there, usually sleeping on the sofa.

"You know you can bring over anything you like, right?" Gabriel had said to him the other night. "Your microscope, and maybe the skull?"

Sherlock didn’t think Billy would really fit into this clean, modern space, but he kept that to himself. "I’ll consider it."

When Gabriel had returned from America after his long exile, Sherlock had offered him to stay at Baker Street for a couple of nights, to give him time to find a place in the city. But one day had turned into another, and it had been so remarkably easy to pick up where they had left off. Or rather, in a better place, since where they had left off the last time hadn’t been all that good.

By the time Gabriel had moved out of Baker Street and settled into his new flat in Knightsbridge, a month had passed and they were already so used to each other’s company that Sherlock had just sort of tagged along, without it ever being discussed.

"You know what they say, Sherlock; third time lucky," Gabriel had said with that warm, unguarded smile over dinner, the first night at the new place.

"Who are they?" Sherlock had replied, only getting a playful slap on the shoulder in return.

The protein kept folding and turning, but Sherlock wasn’t looking at the screen. His eyes were fixed on Gabriel, sleeping next to him. Two minutes into his second episode of REM sleep now, eyes flicking behind closed eyelids. Long dark eyelashes fluttering. Fingers twitching, then stilling; shallow breathing.

What was he dreaming? Impossible to deduce. Sherlock reflected for a moment about how dreams
were a lot like love; hopeless to define in measurable factors. Maddeningly frustrating to make sense of, that’s what it was. He sighed.

Neurotransmitters, sex hormones, neuropeptides. Those were the primary neurochemicals that governed the major drives in the concept called love: sex drive, attachment, partner preference. He visualized each concept as a sign above three closed doors. He saw the number 3 x 3 spinning for a second, then discarded it. Irrelevant.

Dark blonde locks spilled over the white linen pillowcase. Normally he would have wax in his hair to keep the waves softly slicked back, but now his hair was all unruly. Sherlock liked it like that too. Naked torso and grey jogging bottoms, they had used his pyjama trousers to clean up the mess they had made earlier when-

The pulse point just below his ear, a spot that Sherlock loved to put his lips against, feel the soft skin, inhale the familiar scent. Many times, he would look at Gabriel and see two simultaneous images: the grown man in front of him and the eighteen-year old boy he had once been.

I love you. Those were words that Sherlock had never once said out loud. Nor had he heard them spoken, to him that is, before he had met Gabriel. His parents were caring and respectful, but not the types to get all mushy like that with their children. Most of the time they hadn’t been home anyway, and nannies had come and gone in a steady stream, usually taking off by slamming the front door, with tears in their eyes and promising to never return.

Finally Mummy and Daddy had decided that Mycroft was old enough to look after his oddball for a little brother, and then at thirteen, it was off to boarding school and the proper hell begun. Sometimes he wondered if he would have pulled through that final year if he hadn’t met Gabriel.

The first time Gabriel had said it was when they had first tried penetrative sex. It was about a month after Gabe had leaned forward and kissed him and everything had changed. It had been a sunny Friday afternoon in October. Most of the other students had left for home over the weekend, but they had both told their parents that they needed to stay and study for the upcoming test.

The curtains in Sherlock’s room were drawn and they had locked the door and pushed the desk in front of it for good measure.

He had been excused from having to share a room, after an understanding doctor had written a note to the school saying that Sherlock would not be able to benefit from his education otherwise and that it was in the best interest of basically everybody.

Gabriel had been on top of him and Sherlock had been on his back with both of his legs up, folded over Gabriel’s shoulders. They had been fumbling and blushing and cursing, and pushing against each other with a level of desperation and desire that only teenage boys are able to possess. It had hurt a lot yet felt amazing, and for a moment Sherlock’s mind had stilled; the new sensations that rushed through his body becoming his single focus.

"I love you," Gabriel had whispered, their bodies connected, and Sherlock had felt a strange mix of bliss and panic stirring up inside him. What did it mean? he had wondered, not knowing what to reply. So he hadn’t.

It was such a strange thing. Three little words, but they seemed to have an almost infinite number of different meanings. They could be spoken to a lover in the midst of passion, or to a child. Said to a friend as a simple phrase when you hung up the phone.

Or, and this was the trickiest part, they could represent a whole array of things that a person could
feel about another person that one was close to. Spoken like that, Sherlock figured they meant all of the above things but wrapped into one.

Sherlock intensely disliked to say things that he didn't understand. So on the rare occasions when the 'I love you' had in fact been at the tip of his tongue, he had held it back.

Had thought it better not to say anything at all, rather than to risk tangling himself up in a complicated web of unspoken expectations that would surely come back to bite him at some point.

In fact, the urge to say these words had only come over him a handful of times in his whole life, and only ever with two people. One was Gabriel, the other was John.

This had been at the root of the problems with Gabriel, that second time around, right after uni, when they had met again after years apart, and immediately felt themselves drawn back to each other.

"I know you don’t feel comfortable saying it, Sherlock, and I respect that, I really do. But I just can’t help to feel sad sometimes that you don’t, I don’t know, feel the way I do for you."

"But you don’t know that," Sherlock had argued. "Just because I have a difficult time making sense of the concept of love, it doesn’t mean I don’t… you know—"

Always when this would come up, Sherlock would feel like he was waiting for a disaster to happen, like standing at the beach and seeing a tsunami approaching, knowing that you couldn’t outrun the wave.

No matter how he tried, everything seemed to come out wrong. It pained him so much to see Gabriel’s face, usually so confident and smiling, now all troubled.

"I want you to be happy," Sherlock had said. "Maybe if you tell me how often you need to hear it, and on which occasions, I could say it on that schedule?" he had offered. But that was apparently also wrong, evident by the fact that Gabriel had actually started to cry, which was both rare and unsettling.

"No, no you don’t understand. I don’t want to hear it for the sake of it, I just wish you would WANT to say it to me."

"But it’s just words! If I say the exact same words, and I say them because I really want you to feel good about being with me, then what difference does it make?"

"Oh Sherls…", Gabriel would sigh. "I’m sorry I keep bringing this up, I know I’m asking for something you can’t give, and it’s not fair to you. Let's just drop it.”

Sherlock would try, really try, to show his love through his actions instead. That seemed to him a truer way of telling someone how much you cared. He’d focus his observational skills to detect what Gabriel seemed to like, or need, and then tried to be sure to provide it, be it new tennis gear or take out dinner.

But then a couple of weeks would pass, and something would happen, and they’d be back, having some version of the same conversation, once again. How could it be so hard?

Sherlock was jolted out of his thoughts when Gabriel stirred, turned around, then opened his eyes, squinting to the light.

"What time is it?"
"Arse o'clock. Go back to sleep."

"Put that down, you need some sleep as well." Gabriel gently tugged Sherlock’s arm and he obliged, closed the laptop and put it on the floor, then clicked off the bedside lamp.

He laid down next to Gabriel and pulled the duvet up over both of them. Gabriel put a heavy arm around him, and then went back to sleep. Sherlock tucked his face close to Gabriel's neck, observed how their breathing synchronised without any conscious effort. Outside, the wind had subsided and given way to rain.

The word 'Angel’ appeared, in a warm golden color, it floated around for a while. And then it was joined by other words: 'I love you’, written in some sort of fog that would surely dissipate if he dared to touch it. He watched the words dance before his eyes for a moment, and then carefully placed them back in the room for all things Gabriel.
Chapter 4

John was standing in the hallway, listening to Mary giving the nanny more of the seemingly endless instructions of How to Take Care of a Baby for a Couple of Hours.

"…and if she wakes up, I don’t think she will but if she does, try bringing her here, she likes the sound of the telly, but please keep the volume fairly low. And I will have my phone at hand the entire time - did I give you John’s number? Okay, good."

Mary checked for the third time that her phone and charger were in her bag.

"Please remember, we can be here in less than thirty minutes with a taxi, so don’t hesitate to call if it’s not working out, I really don’t want her to be upset.” She exhaled loudly. "Well alright then."

Mary grabbed her handbag, took a few steps towards John and then turned back again. "Oh and if you pick her up from the crib, please don’t forget to switch the breathing monitor back on when you put her back again, you know, and-"

"Mary”, John interrupted, trying to sound as pleasant as possible. "I think it will be alright. Anna feels safe with Mrs. Lerner by now, and Mrs. Lerner knows all there possibly is to know about what to do with babies. Isn’t that right, Mrs. Lerner?”

The nanny nodded affirmatively, and Mary smiled.

"I know, I’m sorry. It just feels so odd to leave her, that’s all.” She turned to the nanny, searching for reassurance.

"We’ll be absolutely fine, dear. I will text you updates and pictures throughout the evening, all right love? Now go out and have fun you two. And don’t worry about the time, as we agreed I’ll be here throughout the night and in the morning as well. A proper night out and a nice little sleep in does wonders for new parents,” Mrs. Lerner said with a wink towards John.

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In the taxi, Mary seemed to relax.

"I think she’s right, John. It’ll do us good to get out for a night, it’s going to be fun. And I think you’ll like Charlotte. Haven’t met her husband but I’m sure he can’t be too bad."

She was talking while scrolling through Instagram on her phone.

"And you know, this restaurant is supposed to be amazing. If it hadn’t been for Charlotte, I don’t think we’d ever managed to get a reservation.”

John didn’t know the couple they were meeting for dinner. The woman was someone Mary had met through her book club, they had become good friends and Mary was often talking to her on the phone.

The woman and her husband sounded like they were active in the art world, and John worried a bit that he wouldn’t have anything to say to them. But never mind, he thought, it was nice just to get out for a night.

"John, I’ve been meaning to ask, but by the time you get home I’m so tired and then I just forget."
I’m sorry I’m not really being a good wife these days. But have you talked to Sherlock recently?”

John’s heart skipped a beat.

"Er, no. I believe he’s in Brussels at the moment, but we said maybe next week.”

Whenever he talked about Sherlock, he worried that the other person would be able to see right through him.

Mary put her left hand on the back of John’s neck, let it rest there, looked at him with kind eyes.

"Honey… did you two have an argument or something? Has something happened that you haven’t told me about? It’s been forever since you even mentioned him, and before you used to talk about him all the time.”

"No!", said John, perhaps a little too loud. "And I didn’t… No, not at all.”

He paused.

"I… I just think he’s been really busy and I mean, so are we. It’s just how it is. The priorities are different right now. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure we’ll pick up eventually,” he said, hoping Mary would drop the subject. Thankfully, she did.

The restaurant was in Covent Garden, and the taxi had to drive around the block to access the one way street. The exterior of the building was unassuming. A group of attractive women in their twenties, dressed up in short skirts and high heels, stood outside smoking, but that was the only sign of anything happening there.

Inside, however, it was already absolutely buzzing. John had to squeeze his way up to the hostess, he took the lead and let Mary follow in his wake.

They ordered drinks at the bar while waiting for the table to get ready. Within five minutes, Mary spotted her friend and her husband making their way towards them.

"Charlotte, this is John,” Mary introduced them and John kissed her on the cheeks.

Charlotte was beautiful in an different sort of way, John thought. She was tall and slender, a bit too thin for John’s taste perhaps, with long dark hair that she wore in a sleek pony tail. She was dressed in a simple back dress, and he noticed her delicate hands, short fingernails painted red. A chunky bracelet thing around her wrist was her only piece of jewelry except for the impossible-to-miss diamond wedding ring .

"Hi there, I’m Mark,” said the husband, enthusiastically shaking John’s hand. He was short and a bit corpulent, with a dark stubble and round glasses. He was wearing a shirt in some kind of orange colored pattern that John thought was borderline insane, but the guy had friendly eyes and seemed to laugh a lot, a rumbling belly laugh that was quite contagious.

John though they looked exactly like the artsy couple that Mary had described them to be, and felt himself relaxing into what probably could turn out to be a decent night.

Over dinner, conversation floated effortlessly, greatly helped by Mark’s offbeat humor and
constant laughing. He asked John about his work, politely choosing not to push John with questions about Afghanistan, and the four of them talked briefly about Anna. Mary showed pictures on her phone, and everyone gushed over the cute baby.

Charlotte and Mark didn’t have any children, and John thought it was kind of nice to get a break from the constant discussions about parenting and babies.

Mark entertained with stories and gossip from the film making business, he was a film producer and worked for a major company, so there was plenty of material to choose from. When he finally stopped for breath, John turned to Charlotte, who was seated next to him.

"So, Mary told me you’re an art curator. I’m sorry for not knowing these things, but what exactly do you do?"

Charlotte was happy to explain, and didn’t seem condescending at all. John actually thought it was pretty interesting, the things she was telling him, about art and a curator’s job. She was funny and quite blunt in the way she talked about things, he could see why she and Mary got along.

It was not what he had expected from this elegant, fragile-looking woman, and John thought it was nice to be surprised in a positive direction for once.

John enjoyed getting caught up in the intelligent conversation that pinged across the table. Mary was her usual, sparkling smiling self, elegantly balancing her attention between everyone, and John watched her with pride.

The waiter cleared the plates and returned a while later with the cheese tray and port wine they had ordered. It occurred to John that since they arrived at the restaurant, he hadn’t had one single thought about the messed up emotional state he had been stuck in for the last couple of weeks.

No obsessive thoughts about Sherlock, nor about his own sexual identity. No fantasies about being out solving crimes with a consulting detective in a long coat. In fact, Sherlock hadn’t even entered his mind, up until now. It was just nice, being out, making new friends, having a good time. Maybe this whole thing was temporary, some sort of mid-life crisis?

And just as John was about to lift his glass to take another sip of wine, feeling happier than in a long time at this comforting possibility, his hand stilled. Because at the entrance of the room, was the unmistakable silhouette of Sherlock Holmes.

John had to grab the edge of the table to steady himself. It was really him. A thousand memories came crushing down.

He hadn’t seen him for so long that the sharpness of his visual memories of Sherlock had begun to fade. *Just like when he was dead.*

The exact color of his eyes, the shape of the bow at his upper lip, the way he moved. It was all coming into focus again as he watched him.

Sherlock. The man who had shook John out of his miserable existence and brought him back to the world of the living again. The man who had let John get close enough to see a vulnerable heart beneath that odd, aloof exterior. They had built their lives around each other. Saved each other, *so many times, and in so many ways.*

He saw Sherlock and knew. The love that John had felt from the first day they had met, really, he had held it at such a desperate distance for so long. And after the Baker Street incident, the had struggled with questions about his sexual identity, never getting any wiser. The impossible
practicalities regarding his life with Mary and his daughter.

It all became simple. John watched Sherlock and finally, finally, his emotions and his mind met and firmly locked together.

Here it was now, laid out in front of him. The truth, in clear view: In this life, there could be many people - women, maybe men - that John would be able to connect with, to like, to love. That was the way John was. But there would never be anyone who John could love the way he loved Sherlock. It was as simple as that.

John thought about leaping up to Sherlock, wrapping his arms around him and never letting go. He wanted to take him by the hand and lead him home, home to Baker Street, and kiss him until they had forgotten everything else and there was nothing left but Sherlock and John and just the two of them, against the rest of the world.

He did nothing, of course, just kept looking.

Sherlock was dressed in a slim-fitting black suit, it looked new. He was deep in conversation with one of the sommeliers; the same blonde woman who had recommended the wine for John’s table.

She pointed at something in the wine list, Sherlock shook his head, she turned a page, pointed, he shook his head again in what John perceived as irritation. Behind Sherlock now, another man appeared. He got in very close to Sherlock and joined the discussion.

John recognized that head of dark blonde, wavy hair, and was abruptly flooded with graphic memories from standing in the doorway at 221B.

John had experienced panic attacks before, but only ever related to his post traumatic nightmares. Now, however, he was praying that his body wouldn’t launch him into one right there at the table. He felt the all too familiar symptoms coming on: racing heart, tunnel vision, a feeling of constriction in his chest. He reminded himself that these were normal and completely harmless sensations, tried to not let anxiety spiral into full blown panic.

"John, are you alright?" asked Mary, ever the perceptive one. John had to struggle with himself to speak.

"Yeah. I’m fine," he managed to get out.

"I’m sorry honey, but you look pale."

It dawned on John that this was the second time that Sherlock had made him feel like this at a nice restaurant. The first time had arguably been a lot worse, because honestly, what could possibly top the shock of your best friend coming back from the dead. However, right now this felt quite difficult as well.

And then everything happened in a slow motion sort of way. Mary was seated across from him so she couldn’t see, but John was facing Sherlock and he realized it could only be a matter of seconds now, and yes, there, Sherlock had raised his head and was scanning the room, and yes, there was the moment when his gaze met John’s.

Sherlock’s eyes widened, and then he swiftly turned around and started to walk away.

John watched as the other man stepped in front of Sherlock, put his hands on his shoulders. They were standing in a corner, too far away for John to be able to hear, but he could still see them. He recognized the signs of agitation in Sherlock, who was gesturing towards John’s table and flailing
his arms around a bit, shaking his head profusely.

The other man was face to face with Sherlock, he seemed to be saying something. He had lowered his hands from Sherlock’s shoulders to the sides of his arms, and was stroking them up and down, then giving them a brisk pat and releasing him.

And then it seemed to be settled, because John could see Sherlock straightening his posture and beginning to move, the other man followed. A moment later, they were standing in front of the table, and John snapped out of his trance. He braced himself and looked straight at them.

Sherlock did not give John as much as a glance, although he must have noticed John searching for his eyes. That bloke was just standing there, looking smug, so close to Sherlock, and John suddenly felt angry.

Actually, he felt furious. What did he ever do to deserve Sherlock standing there and not even dignifying John with a word. Sherlock had been completely shutting him out of his life, avoiding him at all costs, lying about where he was just to get out of seeing John for a few hours - hours that John knew very well he would waste in front of his laptop daily, googling mutations of mold or whatever.

I was willing to die for him, John thought. I found it in myself to forgive him, after he put me through living hell for two bloody years. And he can’t even be bothered to meet once a month for dinner, now when he apparently has more fun things to do.

He remembered Mike’s words. Maybe he just doesn’t know how to tell you?

Well screw that, John thought. Sherlock should know perfectly well that John wasn’t some prejudiced twit, what with Harry and all. Of course he knew that John thought it was all fine.

Either way, it sure was a shitty way to treat a friend.

Mary spoke before John could collect himself.

"Sherlock!” she squealed, ”what a lovely surprise!” She leaped up and kissed his cheek, then sat back down again. ”It’s been ages!”

"A surprise indeed,” John said icily. ”So, how was Brussels, good?”

The blonde man turned questioningly to Sherlock, ”Bru-?” he began, then was quickly shut up by an angry glance.

"Sherlock,” Mary continued, ”these are our good friends Charlotte and Mark.”

Sherlock hadn’t said a thing so far, but now he reached out his hand to say a brief hello, then resumed his oddly stiff posture, arms falling straight down, hands hanging limp. The blonde man also said hello to the thin woman and the friendly looking man with round glasses.

Mary, Charlotte and Mark were all watching with great curiosity the two men standing by their table. They were both handsome, but together they made quite a striking appearance.

Whereas Sherlock had a unique type of beauty, the man next to him was good looking in a more conventional way. His face was clean shaven, with high cheekbones and an angular jaw. His smile had a boyish charm to it, small dimples forming at his cheeks, and revealed a set of perfectly straight, white teeth. Captain of the bloody rugby team, John thought.
John could tell that Sherlock was absolutely panic-stricken, but that didn’t dampen his anger. *He got himself into this mess,* John thought. *Fucking liar.*

"Sherlock, aren’t you going to introduce us?” Mary said with a smile, and it seemed to rouse Sherlock a bit.

"Ah, yes, of course.” He blinked a couple of times before continuing.

"Mary and John, I’d like you to meet my friend Gabriel Smith-Sinclair,” he said in an overly formal tone. "Gabriel, allow me to present Mary and John Watson.”

John leaned back in his seat, combat mode now fully activated. Without planning to, he heard himself speak.

"Your.. 'friend'?” he smiled with lips pressed hard together, finally managing to catch Sherlock’s eyes for a millisecond. He looked terrified.

"John!” Mary hissed from across the table. He didn’t care.

Sherlock again blinked repeatedly, opened his mouth, then closed it, opened it again.

Gabriel wrapped a long arm around Sherlock’s shoulders and pulled him close.

"Boyfriend,” he said in a posh, pleasant voice, meeting John’s challenging stare with steady blue eyes. "I’m his boyfriend.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Still standing in front of the table in the restaurant, the blonde man moved his arm from Sherlock’s shoulders, and instead tucked it around his waist, giving Sherlock a little tug and an encouraging smile. He turned back to John.

"John, it’s terrific to finally meet you! I have heard so much about you."

"Well I haven’t heard a bloody thing about you," John muttered, causing Mary to this time kick his leg under the table.

"John, what the hell is the matter with you!" She turned to Gabriel. "I’m so sorry. Please forgive my husband, I think he’s had too much to drink."

But Gabriel just shrugged, his composure perfectly calm, and his eyes fixed on John. "Well, in that case, I’d say we’d better change that," he said, still smiling. "Would you mind if we joined you?"

John said nothing but Mary immediately replied. "Oh please do, that would be great!" she exclaimed, perhaps trying to make up for John’s crazy behavior. "Let’s ask for two more chairs!"

Now Sherlock jolted alive. "We can’t, we absolutely can’t. I’m terribly sorry, most unfortunate timing, would have been lovely, but as a matter of fact, we were just about to leave and-"

Gabriel turned to Sherlock and shot him a teasing smile. "What do you have to do that’s so important all of a sudden?"

Sherlock stared angrily at him, but Gabriel just waited patiently for his reply, an amused expression in his eyes, until Sherlock grudgingly replied.

"I have to return some video tapes."

At this, Mark, who up until now had been quietly following the exchange, bursted out in a roaring laugh. He clapped his hands together in a happy gesture. "Brilliant! That was absolutely brilliant! Perfect timing, perfect reference! Ha!"

He beamed at Sherlock, who now looked less terrified, but instead thoroughly confused.

Everybody was facing Mark, though he didn’t seem to notice.

"Sherlock Holmes!" he went on. "I knew from the papers that you’re a famous detective, but I had no idea you were such a cinephile! Oh the beauty of that line, isn’t it just one of the best ones ever written! The perfect repetition of it throughout, and the way it captures the essence of that entire 80’ies era while at the same time providing a comment on-"

He stopped talking and squeezed himself halfway up from his seat, reached over Mary and the table and all the wine glasses, and actually grabbed the sleeve of Sherlock’s suit jacket. "I absolutely insist that you stay! You and I have a lot to talk about, Sherlock."

Sherlock stepped into character and returned Mark’s smile with a big, teethy grin. Mark sat down and slapped his hand against the table in an excited gesture. "'American Psycho', of course that
movie should be right up your alley, serial killer and all. Just bloody brilliant!"

John was trying hard to not act any further on his anger. He knew that he had already crossed a few lines, and was beginning to sense that Mary would not put up with more before possibly confronting him, and that he wanted to avoid at all costs. So instead, he was sitting silently at the table, occasionally glancing at Sherlock, who had his phone in his hand and was not looking up.

The others led the small talk, and John thought that that bloke - he refused to think of him as Sherlock’s…whatever - certainly knew how to make room for himself. He seemed to command everyone’s attention in a most obnoxious way, and both Mary and Charlotte were annoyingly friendly towards him.

After a while, it was Mary who caved in to her curiosity.

"So, Gabriel, it sounds like you and Sherlock have known each other for quite some time?"

"Please, call me Gabe," he said. "Yes, we actually went to boarding school together. So I know what Sherlock was like when he was fifteen. If anyone’s interested, I’m open to trade information for drinks," he smiled, then faked a loud ’ouch’ when Sherlock shoved an elbow into his ribs.

John felt a little pang in his chest, not only because of this display of affection that he was being forced to watch. He wished that he could have met Sherlock at fifteen. So many years of their lives wasted apart from each other, and now they were sitting here with these impossible barriers between them.

With Sherlock so close to John, it was hard to hold on to the anger. It was Sherlock, after all, his best friend, the man he’d shared his life with for longer than he ever had with any girlfriend. Hell, longer than with Mary even. Each time John looked at Sherlock, he was overwhelmed with emotion. God how he’d missed him!

John had watched Sherlock as he first sat down, awkwardly trying to dodge Mark’s questions about a subject John knew Sherlock had absolutely no knowledge of.

It reminded John of how difficult it would often be for Sherlock to navigate muddy, interpersonal waters. Perhaps John just needed to understand the reason behind Sherlock’s retreat. He made a promise to himself to try to calm down.

However, he still felt insanely jealous. He had to find a way to reach through to Sherlock. It was unacceptable to just let that bloke have free reign.

"But here’s the thing. Sherlock and I didn’t know each other at all, because well,” Gabe turned to Sherlock and caught his eye for a second, ”you didn’t really like socializing with us idiots, now did you!” He laughed out loud. "Either that or you were just playing real hard to get!"

Sherlock was keeping his eyes mostly fixed on the phone in his lap, but once in a while he would glance up at Gabriel. John could see that he was a little bit flustered.

He still looked uncomfortable but not entirely unhappy; in fact, John could see a smile lingering at the corners of his mouth. Damn it, he thought, this is not going well.

Then he got an idea. From his pocket, he maneuvered out his phone. He kept it hidden under the
'Hello stranger'. He pressed send.

"Go on, we’re listening," prompted Mary.

"Alright. Naturally, I was so bloody curious about this gorgeous, grumpy boy, but he was never around.” He looked at Sherlock again. "Right after lecture you’d take off like a bat out of hell!”

Sherlock seemed to have relaxed a bit, listening to his boyfriend tell the story about how they met. When his phone chimed he immediately picked it up, and John thought he saw a slight smile cross his face.

Sherlock put his phone back down in his lap again, turning his attention back to Gabe.

"So anyway. We had gotten to our final year of boarding school, and I was elected head boy-” he paused and looked at Sherlock. "Shezza, wake up, that was the cue for your favourite dirty joke!"

Mary and Charlotte giggled at this. Sherlock’s cheeks turned red, but he was also smiling, clearly enjoying the teasing attention from Gabriel.

_You sleazy bastard_, thought John.

John had switched his phone to silent, but it vibrated when three texts appeared in quick succession.

'Didn’t expect to see you here. SH'

'How is everything? SH'

'Have reason to believe Mrs. Hudson is a shoplifter. SH'

Sherlock had not once looked at him, he kept his eyes either down to the phone or on Gabriel. John broke out in a big grin, and started to type.

'I know who you are, you don’t have to sign. I can see you typing.'

"Alright, so as head boy, one has to give a speech in front of the entire school and faculty at the opening ceremony in late September. In Latin.”

"Phew!” exclaimed Mark. "I’m glad I didn’t go to that school!”

John’s phone buzzed again.

'No you can’t. I’m very good at hiding.'

'I’ll say', John wrote back, and to his immense happiness, Sherlock briefly met his eyes and smiled.

Gabriel was animatedly telling his story, and held the table’s attention. "Everybody knew Sherlock was this genius of course, and he was also known to be willing to share some of that big brain for, you know, the hard currency of boarding school - cigarettes and booze. It’s just like in prison I imagine!”

John was picturing a teenage Sherlock, trading school papers for Marlboros and Vodka.

"So, I was actually rather good at Latin, but I saw my chance to finally get a breakthrough with
Sherly here. So, I asked him for help with the speech… and the rest, as they say, is history!” Gabriel smiled, looking pleased with himself.

For the first time since they sat down, Sherlock spoke. ”But you were not,” he said, sounding slightly annoyed.

”Not what?”

”Not ‘rather good’ at Latin. You were absolutely terrible.”

”As a matter of fact, I wasn’t.” Gabe smiled.

”As a matter of fact, you were. You didn’t know a thing. One could have thought you had never attended a single lecture,” said Sherlock, looking superior.

Gabriel watched him for a moment, then suddenly widened his eyes. ”Oh my god!” he exclaimed. ”You.. you never realised!” He was shaking his head, a look of amazement spreading across his face.

”What?”

”That it was all part of my cunning plan, of course! That I faked being no good, to get to spend more time cozied up with you and the books on your narrow little bed!”

Damn you to hell, thought John.

Sherlock shifted in his seat, paused, John could see his eyes moving rapidly as he was thinking.

”That’s ridiculous!” Sherlock said. ”Conjugate Esse. It’s irregular, by the way.”

”I know it is,” Gabe smiled. ”Sum, Es, Est, Sumus, Estis, Sunt! And Es in imperative singularis, and Este in imperative pluralis.”

”Hm”, said Sherlock, his eyebrows furrowed. ”Translate!” he demanded. Utinam logica falsa tuam philosophiam totam suffodiant.”

Gabe rose to the challenge. May faulty logic undermine your entire philosophy. Ha! Easy!”

Sherlock actually looked taken aback at this. ”I have a catapult. Give me all the money or I will fling an enormous rock at your head.”

The answer came without hesitation: ”Catapultam habeo… Nisi pecuniam omnem mihi dabis… ad caputuum saxum immane mittam. Not so cocky now are we, Sherlock??”

Can’t this man just go fuck himself, thought John.

Sherlock was now staring at Gabe with his mouth gaping open.

Gabriel looked ecstatic. ”You know what, this is better than Christmas! I outsmarted Sherlock bloody Holmes!” He summoned the waitress when she walked by.

”We need three bottles of Taittinger to this table, promtus, please!”
The champagne turned up the buzz, and an hour later, John found himself standing with the others by a neon lit bar in the restaurant’s large outdoor space.

The summer night was warm and lovely, and they were surrounded by beautiful, well dressed people, most of them younger, but there still was a good mix to the crowd.

John was standing between Mary and Mark, and Sherlock and the bloke were leaned back against the bar, chatting with Charlotte and some friends they apparently had in common.

Round tables were placed around a dance floor that occupied the middle of the outdoor space, a few people were dancing.

Red and blue lights bathed the area, it was stylishly decorated with large exotic trees in containers, plush black pillows were scattered out on the chairs and benches.

There was a DJ playing club music that John didn’t recognize, why should he, he hadn’t been out like this since… it dawned on him, since his stag night with Sherlock.

With great fondness he thought about what had been his favorite part of that night, Sherlock and him sitting in their chairs at Baker Street, laughing and being silly and very drunk.

And he remembered that he had actually fallen off his chair a bit, and grabbed Sherlock’s knee, and even said something that.. well. No point in what-if’s, now.

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Suddenly, Mark leaned in.

"Attention everyone! We’ve got a major motion picture heartthrob coming our way!"

A slender, fair skinned man in his thirties was approaching the bar where they were standing. He had black framed glasses, and was wearing black jeans, a red wool cardigan and a t-shirt with a Pink Floyd print. Mark shook his hand while they exchanged a few pleasantries.

"Too bad about that Oscar," Mark said to the man. "It should have been yours. But you’ll get plenty of more chances, I know it!"

"Thanks Mark, but it really doesn’t matter. It’s just, you know, part of a game that I don’t care for that much anyway. The acting is what’s important to me.”

"Right you are, you’ve always had a good head on your shoulders," said Mark. "And I understand congratulations are in order, marriage and a baby, that’s fantastic!"

The actor looked pleased.

Mark then turned to the others, who were all trying very hard not to gawk at the celebrity standing before them.

All except for Sherlock, that was, who had used this convenient break in conversation to take out his phone and was leaning against the bar again, busy scrolling through a dissertation on carpet fibers.

"Everyone, as I’m sure you all know, this is my friend and remarkably gifted actor, Ben.”

The man smiled politely towards them. "Hi guys, nice to meet you,” he said, then added, "Charlotte, you look lovely,” and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Mark was a great support to me
in the early days.”

Mark gave him a good pat on the shoulder.

While the actor’s attention was still turned to their little group, Gabriel suddenly spoke up. ”I thought your portrayal of Turing was simply brilliant,” he said with a big smile. ”Though I’m sure you get that all the time.”

”Well it’s always nice to hear again,” said the actor, returning his smile, and John could have sworn the actor’s cheeks got the slightest bit flustered.

When the actor had left, everyone but Sherlock seemed to be buzzing from the exciting meeting.

”He looks younger in real life,” said Mary, turning to Charlotte, they were both all giddy and giggling.

Sherlock briefly glanced up from his phone towards Gabriel. ”I didn’t know you had a thing for gingers,” he said with a slow, exaggerated pronunciation of the last word. He then looked back down at his phone and continued to scroll.

”I don’t,” smiled Gabe. ”But you have to admit he’s kind of hot.”

”Don’t see it.”

”Well, plenty of people think he’s very talented.”

Sherlock looked up and raised one eyebrow. ”Really, what did he do? Find a cure for Ebola?”

They all broke out in a loud laugh, and even John couldn’t help but join in. Sherlock’s grumpy expression gave way, now he was basking in the attention from the others. And in the midst of laughter, John finally managed to catch Sherlock’s eyes, and to his enormous relief, he could see that his defenses were down at last.

Maybe it was the champagne, maybe the release of laughter, but it felt like that barrier was gone, and John’s heart soared. Sherlock was holding John’s gaze, meeting him with warm, smiling, sparkling eyes, and it was just the way that it had used to be, before, the two of them laughing together.

John felt a raw happiness shooting up inside of him, warming him to the core. He intensely wanted to reach out and touch Sherlock, but instead had to sit and watch as Gabriel did exactly that.

Gabe put an arm around Sherlock and pulled him in close. ”The guy’s an actor, Sherly. He’s in movies and some big tv-thing.”

Sherlock resumed his nonchalant expression. ”How utterly pointless.”

More laughter.

”Oh baby,” said Gabe and placed a wet kiss on Sherlock’s cheek. John winced at the sight. ”Obviously he’s got nothing on you.”

”Obviously,” replied Sherlock, looking pleased.

Chapter End Notes
The latin phrases are pulled straight from the internets, my apologies if they are not correct.

And please remember, it's all a work of imagination, and all for fun. Nothing has anything to do with persons in real life!
When John got back from the lavatory, he didn’t see anyone from their group. The tempo had now picked up significantly, and the outdoor space was absolutely packed. The dance floor was crowded and it was difficult to make out anyone in the summer night darkness.

After walking around for a while, he spotted Mary and Charlotte dancing in the crowd, Mary waved happily when she saw him. John decided to get another drink, and then saw Sherlock standing leaned back against the bar, alone, in the same spot he had been before. He was holding a glass of water in his hand, looking out over the people dancing. John recognized that his opportunity had come.

John walked up next to Sherlock, and used his body weight and left shoulder to carve out a space for himself at the jammed bar.

"Hi there."

Sherlock gave him a polite nod.

John looked at Sherlock and was taken aback by how beautiful he was. The colored lights were playing across his face, over his pale skin. His dark hair had some kind of product in it, it was gleaming and John wanted to touch it. They were standing so close to each other that their arms were touching, and John could feel the scent of Sherlock. It felt like home.

"Smart move to drink water. The last time we were out like this together, I recall that we woke up in the drunk tank."

Sherlock smiled. "I thought that was an obligatory part of a stag night."

"Sure makes for a good story," John smiled back. He had been standing this close to Sherlock before, on countless occasions, but this time, it felt different; different and difficult and wonderful.

"Had any good cases lately?" John tried to get a conversation going, but it felt weird, having to ask about the things he used to be so tightly interwoven in, and Sherlock was politely answering his questions, but not providing anything more.

"Lestrade has been keeping me busy, can’t complain."

John decided to give up on the small talk. It was the first time in the entire evening that they had been alone. The time was now.

"Sherlock," he began, briefly licking his lips. "I need to know why you are avoiding me."

Standing so close, he could literally feel Sherlock tense up at his question. There was no reply.

"If I have done something wrong, please tell me so I can make it better."

Still no reply. John was facing Sherlock but he was just looking straight out in the empty air again. John, however, knew him well enough to see that he was intensely processing John’s words, evaluating the situation.

John forged ahead. He was feeling out of his depth but had been greatly encouraged by the brief
moments of connection they’d had during the evening. He was determined to try to sort this thing out.

He thought again about what Mike had said, and decided to go along that line.

"You know Sherlock.. I wish you had felt that you could tell me about, er, about Gabriel…and all.” He was struggling to find the words. "You know I think it’s all… fine. It wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

"Oh do me a favour, John!” Sherlock scoffed.

He had turned to John and was now staring intensely at him, with a look that John interpreted as… disdain? The previous warmth that had been lingering between them, just before, was all gone.

John felt anger rushing up inside of him again, this was really unfair and he’d be damned if he was going to just stand there and take it.

"What! Just what, Sherlock!” he yelled back. "If you seriously think it would have been an issue for me, you know, with you being gay,” John had to struggle to get the word out without hesitation,"then you are an even bigger idiot than I have been giving you credit for!”

John was seething. "We lived together for years, Sherlock, years! And I didn’t keep any big secrets about myself from you, because close friends usually don’t do that! You could have just told me!”

There was vicious fire in Sherlock’s eyes now, and he was smiling, a mean looking smile.

"Yes of course, John, I could have just told you.” He echoed John’s words back in a fake, whiny voice, reminding John of a little boy trying to pick a fight with his brother.

"And exactly what do you suggest I should have said? Great shot, John; oh and by the way, I LIKE TO TAKE IT UP THE ARSE!”

Sherlock had shouted the last part at the top of his lungs, so close to John’s face that he could feel small drops of spit hitting his skin. John stared blankly back at him.

The crowd around them had gone dead silent. John felt like every single person by the bar was staring at them, and quite possibly, that was also the case. John was certainly not going to lift his head to find out. He could hear giggles around them, a few whispers, someone made a wolf whistle, before the usual noise was finally starting to pick up again.

"Perhaps I said that a bit loud,” Sherlock said in his normal voice and with an absolutely expressionless face. He was still only inches away, face to face with John, and neither of them were moving.

And then, at the absurdity of it all, after the gruesome tension of this entire night, John just couldn’t help it. He could feel the corners of his mouth twitching, there was no holding back, and a big smile spread across his face. He broke out laughing.

Now Sherlock was smiling too, and within a moment, they were both laughing so hard that they had to support themselves against the bar desk to keep upright. Tears from laughter, but maybe also from release, were blurring John’s vision and making their way down his face, he wiped them with his hand. As soon as their laughter appeared to die down, one of them would glance at the other and there they were again, struggling for breath.

"Oh god, you truly are mad,” panted John, happily meeting Sherlock’s smiling eyes.
"I know. But you’re not exactly sane either."

They were still smiling, but the laughter had finally trickled off. John’s abs were hurting from the vigorous workout. They had turned around and were now facing towards the bar and the many colorful bottles at the back, their elbows perched on the desk. John was still so close to Sherlock’s face, and he couldn’t remember when he last felt this happy.

Sherlock looked down but didn’t move away. They stood quietly next to each other for a minute, leaned against the desk, still smiling, catching their breath. Then, with his eyes fixed on an untouched plate of olives in front of them, Sherlock broke the silence.

"You would have moved out," he said in a barely audible voice.

"What?" John said again but this time in a soft, intimate voice, turning to Sherlock.

"Of course I wouldn’t have. Look Sherlock, I don’t know where you got it from, this crazy idea that-"

"Let me just finish, ok John," Sherlock interrupted. "It’s… it’s tremendously difficult, this conversation, for me. So please just hear me out."

John grew silent. He waited, nervously, facing Sherlock.

Sherlock drew a breath, and continued, now turned to John.

"Of course you wouldn’t have, not right away. But eventually. John I know how sensitive this matter is to you. It would have changed things. Small things first, then adding up, then becoming unbearable. And then you would have left. And I-” he paused, swallowed, "I wanted to postpone that for as long as I possibly could."

Sherlock had begun to stab the olives with a toothpick.

"It would have changed everything."

John bit his lip.

"But what if-" he cleared his throat.

"Alright, perhaps it would have changed everything." He looked intensely at Sherlock.

"But I think maybe not in the way you think."

There, he’d said it. No taking it back. He didn’t want to take it back. He wanted Sherlock to know.

He could feel Sherlock tensing up next to him again, he saw his mind examining all possible meanings and implications of what John had said. He was blinking again, his eyebrows in a deep furrow. John was overcome with a sudden, resounding sadness, for himself and for Sherlock and for everything that had to be so goddamn difficult.

Without thinking, he reached out his right hand to touch Sherlock’s face, cupping his jaw and cheek. John could feel the tingle of Sherlock’s flushed skin against his palm, and the softness of his earlobe as his index fingertip skimmed the tip.

Sherlock’s breath hitched, his body froze. John knew that Sherlock’s mind was racing. His eyes
were distant, he looked shocked and, well, scared.

"John?" he said quietly, his eyes darting between John’s steady gaze and his mouth.

John briefly wet his own lip, then leaned in a bit closer. Sherlock’s hot breath was hitting his face, he could feel the scent of Sherlock’s aftershave and the alcohol they’d been drinking. Sherlock eyes were half closed, he was completely motionless. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. John searched for eye contact and when he found it, he stroked his thumb softly across Sherlock’s cheekbone. Sherlock was breathing faster now, his eyes were dark. John decided to close the gap between them.

"There you are! Fuck’s sake, been looking all over. Called you like ten times."

Sherlock had yanked back at lightning’s speed, while John slowly straightened up and gathered his composure. His heart was beating fast, he felt too overwhelmed to form a single linear thought. In a haze, he looked up.

Gabriel was standing behind them, looking quite drunk. He was swaying, and proceeded to stabilize himself with a heavy hand on each of John’s and Sherlock’s shoulder.

"I’m glad to see you two have sorted things out! Told you Curly, there was nothing to worry about!" he slurred happily. "Although, John, I would prefer if you scooted back a bit, you’re not crossing over to the dark side now are you!" He sniggered.

Gabe withdrew his hand from John’s back, and instead grabbed ahold of Sherlock’s arms, shaking him gently. John could tell Sherlock was just as hazed as he was, but Gabriel was too drunk to notice.

"Listen up, Shez! You’ll never guess who I just met! Just kidding, you’ll probably deduce it in a second!"

"But I’ll save you the trouble, okay baby. Eddie! Edward Wanker! He’s… here."

"Eddie, really?" said Sherlock, now suddenly back again, focusing his attention on Gabe. "Eddie Walker is here? Haven’t seen him in years."

"And I was looking for you, because he wanted to, er, discuss skiing. Yeah! He wants to know if we’re interested in going with him." He laughed. "Says he has some, er, really good slopes! So, what do you say?" He finished with a smile and a wink towards Sherlock.

John tuned out their odd conversation. What had just happened? He had been one second away from kissing Sherlock. Would Sherlock have pulled away if they hadn’t been interrupted? John didn’t think so, and his entire body felt electric at the possibility.

Mary. Could she have seen? He pictured her coming up to the bar just as… John suddenly felt very guilty, but that didn’t mean he regretted what he’d just done (almost done, he corrected himself).

No, on the contrary, what dominated John’s mind at this moment, was a fluttering, soaring feeling of happiness. Maybe it’s not impossible after all, he thought. Could it be? Could it be he still had a chance? Sherlock. Oh god.

"Excuse us for a while, John," Gabe mumbled and then took Sherlock by the hand and began to drag him away into the thick crowd. As they left, Sherlock turned his head to look at John; a
thousand unspoken questions in his eyes.

John was still standing by the bar, astonished, when Mary found him there and said it was time to go home.

"Let me just find Sherlock, I want to let him know that I’m, eh, that we’re leaving,” said John. "Wait here for me honey, have a seat, you must be tired from all that dancing.”

He grabbed a free bar stool for Mary, then took off to look for Sherlock.

*What am I going to say to him?* John wondered while making his way around the area. He had no idea how Sherlock would even be reacting by now. John knew the odds were strongly leaning to Sherlock avoiding him again, but it felt impossible to leave without seeing him one final time tonight.

John had expected to find Sherlock standing around somewhere, observing. What he had not in a million years expected, however, was this.

Sherlock was in the middle of the dance floor, with both arms up in the air. He had taken off his suit jacket and unbuttoned the two top buttons of his shirt. His body was flush against Gabriel’s as they were dancing to the music that was blasting from the speakers. Gabriel was holding his hands on Sherlock’s hips as they moved. John felt his mouth fall open.

He stood watching for a while, taking in the surreal scene. This was.. *wrong*. John was sober enough to wonder if jealousy was the main reason why this was making him so extremely uncomfortable. That certainly was a part of it, he decided, but.. no.

This was not Sherlock. He remembered the way he’d been at the stag night, stumbling around, picking a fight with that guy even. But… he hadn’t been acting this… uninhibited. And just thirty minutes ago, he’d been quite sober and drinking water.

John was by no means a naive man, and it didn’t take him long to form an idea of what was going on. "*He wants to discuss going skiing…*”, he remembered Gabriel’s words to Sherlock, and it all fell into place. *Fuck!*

Captain John H. Watson marched right towards the two men on the dance floor, not bothering to apologize to the people he bumped into along the way.

He grabbed Sherlock, one strong hand on his arm, the other back around his neck, and pulled him away, pushed him out from the dance floor and away from the crowd.

"What the hell!” he heard Gabriel shouting, then noticed him coming after, trying to grab ahold of John. He pushed him away with a hard shoulder, saw him actually losing his balance and tumble to the ground.

John pressed Sherlock up against the brick wall of the restaurant exterior. Sherlock was looking at him with crazy eyes, his pupils were dilated to the extent that only a thin line of his irises were visible.
"Oh for fuck’s sake, Sherlock!” John whispered to him, then pushed two fingers against the pulse point on his neck. "Fuck Sherlock, your heart is racing! What did you take?!!”

By the way the Sherlock was looking, John wasn’t expecting much sensible conversation, but then Sherlock suddenly reached out to put his hand on top of John’s that was still pressing to his neck. He stared at John with wild, disbelieving eyes.

"But you are not gay,” he said, shaking his head for emphasis.

Then Gabriel found them, John noticed the crazy eyes on that one too.

He was trying to pull John away from Sherlock.

"What the hell John, what do you think you’re doing!” he looked confused and angry.

John let go of Sherlock and turned to face Gabriel. John’s voice was low and threatening, vibrating with rage.

"No. NO! What the HELL are YOU DOING! What did you give him? What did you take??”

Gabriel scoffed, drunk and high.

"Take a break, why don’t you doc. It’s just a little coke, no need to get your pants in a twist here.”

At this, John grabbed Gabriel by his shirt, shook him around, and pushed him up against the hard wall.

"Just a little coke? Just a little coke? ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE??”

Gabriel held up his palms in a deflecting gesture.

"Relax, John, god. It’s all good, top quality stuff, it’s fine,” he said, expecting this to calm John down.

"Hey, hey…” Sherlock had apparently come out of it a bit and was trying to make sense of what was going on.

John could feel himself lingering on the edge of self control.

"You’re giving COCAINE to an ADDICT!! Are you trying to KILL him!!”

John was shouting, not one inch away from the other man’s face now.

Gabriel pushed John away, his aim more focused this time and John had to take a few steps back to regain his balance.

"Oh for christ’s sake, John! Don’t you think it’s up to Sherlock to decide what he wants to do, he’s not a child! We’ve been out like this a thousand times, he loves this. My god!”

John recognized the shaky rage of the cocaine high. John stood back, trying to regain his composure.

"Let me tell you something, John. When I came here three months ago, Sherlock was like a bloody shadow of himself. He never laughed! Just shuffled around his flat in his pyjamas, like a goddamn zombie. Wouldn’t eat, wouldn’t sleep. Just... Did you see the way he laughed tonight? Did you see him dancing just now?”
"You can’t be fucking SERIOUS!" John shouted back. "I pulled Sherlock out of a fucking CRACK DEN, just a few months ago! Let me tell you, there was nobody bloody laughing then!"

Gabe looked furious.

"Do you think it’s EASY being Sherlock Holmes, huh, John! Don’t you think he deserves a break from himself just once in a bloody while! And this,” he gestured out towards the crowd, “is hardly a crack den! So why don’t you do me a favour and stay the fuck away, ok! FUCK. OFF. JOHN!"

He gave John a hard push in the chest to punctuate each of the last three words.

And that was the last straw for John. The punch hit hard, right across Gabriel’s left cheek, and it sent him tumbling into the brick wall behind him.

In the corner of his eye, John saw Mary. Oh no. She walked over and stretched out a hand to help Gabriel up on his feet again, he accepted it, then leaned back against the wall, holding both his hands to his burning cheek. Sherlock was just observing the spectacle; high, dazed, stunned.

Mary turned to John.

"Let’s go."

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In the taxi, on their way to the home that they shared, Mary spoke to John for the first time since they had left the restaurant. She was turned away from him, gazing through the window into the darkness.

"I guess I always knew, John,” she said quietly. "Before he had even come back."

She turned to face him, slowly shaking her head.

"I’m not stupid you know… I just didn’t want to see it. I wanted to believe that what you were telling me.. that it was true."

John met her eyes. It felt like a knife twisting in his gut, seeing the hurt and the despair.

"I’m sorry, Mary,” he whispered to her.

"We’ll talk tomorrow, okay,” she said, then turned away again.
Chapter 7

It was already past noon. They had walked across the street and over to the café in Hyde Park, and managed to get the table in the corner.

Sherlock observed Gabe as he sat slumped down in the chair across from him, uncharacteristically scruffy-looking. He hadn’t bothered with his hair today, dark circles under his eyes, his facial skin a bit red and blotchy, unshaven. He was dressed in a pink Lacoste polo with the print ‘Game, Set and Match’ across the chest.

On his left cheek, a pattern of blue and red and a little bit yellow. Yellow or perhaps green? Sherlock tried to figure out what parts of John’s fist were correlated to which marks.

The largest one of the hematomas underneath his eye was caused by the middle major knuckle, but what about the small one below that, finger bone or knuckle?

Since waking up, Sherlock had been trying to deal with conflicting emotions regarding John. Having to waste his resources dealing with emotions, he thought, was bad enough; dealing with conflicting emotions, decidedly worse.

Thinking of laughing with John by the bar made him happy, he’d already stored that moment in John’s room in his mind palace.

However, seeing the damage on Gabe’s face made him angry. John had no right, taking out his anger with Sherlock on him. Hell, what even gave John the right to try to control Sherlock like that.

Gabe had a point, Sherlock thought, in that many of those around him treated him like less than capable. It made him want to more of the things he knew provoked them.

He turned his attention back to Gabe’s cheek. This would most certainly develop into a quite spectacular bruise. Gabe had been going on about how to explain it to his client in Hong Kong tomorrow.

”Tell them you were in a drug-related fist fight, that should give you some leverage”, Sherlock had suggested, getting a flipped finger and a lackluster ”very funny” in return.

On the table, two glasses of almost finished orange juice, and two large, blue and white teacups, one empty, one full. Sherlock’s tea had since long gone cold, but he planned to drink it anyway. Under normal circumstances, Gabriel would have gotten up to get him a hot refill but today he hadn’t, and Sherlock was not going to bother to do it himself.

Sherlock’s mind was still working overtime trying to piece together last night’s events, but it was insanely frustrating how poorly it went. His thought processes were not functioning to their usual capability, the price for the Ambien he had taken to be able to sleep when they got back home, and had topped up again this morning. Worth it, thought, compared to the crash that had otherwise hit.

”We’re definitely too old for this, Sherls,” Gabe had grunted as they were making their way out into the bright daylight, throats dry and splitting headaches forming. ”Not twenty-four anymore. I feel like shit!” He sighed, and put on the pair of sunglasses he had been clutching in his hand. ”Good Lord how I wish I hadn’t run into The Wanker! God, what was I thinking.”

”Seemed like a good idea at the time,” Sherlock mumbled back. This was a walk in the park compared to the monster comedown crashes he’d experienced in the past, but that he kept to
himself.

Sherlock was not paying much attention to the stream of words coming from the man beside him; it was something about Edward Walker getting fired from his job at an investment bank and having served time in jail for embezzlement. Instead, he was busying himself with the task of meticulously going through, once again, the sequence of events with John at the bar.

Spotting John approaching, trying to appear neutral, the jolt he had felt when John squeezed in to stand next to him and their arms had touched. Allowing himself to relax, to talk, to tell John about the things they had never come close to discussing, before. Laughing side by side, the way they used to do. Seeing admiration and affection in John’s eyes.

It had felt… so good. Too good. He had let down his guard and allowed himself to bask in the warm, shining light that was John. It had felt wonderful but had ruined months of hard work.

STUPID!

The massive effort he had been making, to block out John, limit their interaction to a minimum - all preventive measures to avoid the flood of emotions that John always managed to stir up within him. It had been necessary, in order to allow new emotions to take hold. Ones that wouldn’t be so painfully, miserably one sided. Ones that he didn’t need to hide or be ashamed of.

To allow for the chance to feel love towards another person and to have it reciprocated. The simple act of sharing a bed, waking up together.

The sex… Sex, Sherlock thought, was a failproof antidote for boredom. He had gone without it for so long, and it was such a great release to have it back in his life. That, and the intoxicating feeling of having someone desire him. Someone who wanted to be fully his, no reservations.

Not having to deal with the constant ache and apprehension that came from knowing it could end at any time if the other person found themselves a good enough date.

Things he had dreamt of having with John, but that had never happened and now never would.

All that work, wasted in a matter of an evening. And then John had said that thing and acted like he was actually going to kiss him. That, he couldn’t even begin to comprehend. Sherlock had never been able to form a proper understanding of what John was thinking about him.

John’s emotions, thoughts and motives regarding Sherlock continued to elude him, and it was maddening.

"John’s a proper psychopath, how could you stand him for so long? Who goes around beating people up like that? I don’t get why was this such a big deal for him.”

Gabe took a big bite of the croissant he was holding in his hand.

"He thought he was looking out for me.”

"By punching your boyfriend in the face, yeah that’s completely normal behavior.”

Gabe made a face and then grew quiet, Sherlock could see him weighing his words. After a minute long silence, Gabe spoke again.

"You know Sherls, it feels like I’ve known you forever, but sometimes I remember that there were twelve long years when we didn’t keep in touch. Don’t get me wrong here, but I can’t help to wonder-”
Another pause, another considering of wording.

"He said he’d gotten you out of a drug den? You know I didn’t believe it for a second, but, what did he mean? Because that’s just ridiculous? Right?"

"Don’t be an idiot. It was for a case. I was only there for a case, and by some unfortunate coincidence, John found me there. He got it all wrong." Sherlock shrugged, took a sip of his cold tea.

"Oh, ok." He was silent for a while, but Sherlock could see he was not going to let this go just yet.

"But, he’s used to you being undercover, right? Why would he assume that you weren’t that time?"

"I haven’t got the faintest."

"But he called you an addict. Why?"

"He’s a doctor, Gabe. They have very narrow minded definitions of those things. What time’s your flight again?"

"Not until seven thirty."

Sherlock was hoping to change the conversation away from John, but apparently, no such luck.

Gabe leaned closer over the table, lowered his voice.
"Sherlock, ehm." He drew a breath, hesitated. "Please don’t get mad, but-"

Sherlock let out a deliberate sigh, rolled his eyes. "What now?"

"I need to ask you something. We’ve talked about this before, but I want to ask you again. I didn’t really think about it last night, but I did today. You know the way John was acting towards me, right from the start, way before the coke. He was so bloody hostile, I’m surprised he didn’t punch me sooner… If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was jealous."

"Jealous?" Sherlock frowned.

"Rather."
Gabe straightened his back and locked his eyes on Sherlock, who was squirming in his seat.

"Just tell me Sherlock, no lying, no fibbing. I’m a big boy, I promise I can take it, but I need to know. Did you use to fuck? Yes or no, please."

"NO! Of course not! I’ve told you, John’s one hundred percent straight."
(Or so I used to believe, Sherlock thought.)

Gabriel flinched slightly.
"But otherwise you would have, you mean?"

"Rude!"
"Ok ok I’m sorry. Fine. It’s good to know. It’s just… why would he be acting like that?"

Sherlock watched as Gabe walked his fingertips lightly across his swollen cheek, checking the damage. It wasn’t right.

"I don’t know, Gabe." Sherlock reached under the table, put his large hand on Gabriel’s denim clad
thigh, stroked it a few times. "I don’t know and I don’t care.”

But he did care, a great deal, of course he did. It was impossible to stop thinking about this. John, jealous? Maybe not actually being mad about the secretly-gay-thing, but instead - jealous? But jealous as a friend - or as a lover? Gabe had certainly seen it the latter way. Sherlock added this potential piece of the puzzle to the rest.

Jealous as a friend, well, yes, maybe so. He had known instinctively that John would have a hard time adjusting to the dull, ordinary, family oriented lifestyle in the suburbs. But John knew Gabe wasn’t coming along with him on cases. It was not like he had replaced John on that account.

Furthermore, it was hard to interpret the words John had used, *I think maybe not in the way you think*, as anything other than an erotic innuendo. Sherlock didn’t see how it could possibly be so, but then again, it made that almost kiss somewhat more understandable.

But what about all those countless occasions on which John so adamantly had defended his unwavering heterosexuality, time and time again, over a period spanning years? Never giving Sherlock even the slightest indication.

What could possibly have changed? He did a rapid scan of every interaction he’d had with John since their last meeting, but came up short. This was beginning to feel a bit like a case, he thought, frustrated to not understand. Maybe he should accept John’s next request to meet up, gather some more information.

After all, the damage was already done and John was back at the forefront of his mind. One more time couldn’t hurt. And he was certain John would try to get in touch, most likely within 24 hours.

When they got back to the flat, they stumbled back into the unmade bed, still fully dressed. The cool bed linen and the darkness from the expensive black out curtains felt like a blessing. Sherlock woke up after forty minutes, uncomfortable and sweaty. He quickly undressed, downed a glass of water together with some ibuprofen and paracetamol, and then fell asleep again.

Two blissful hours later, he was awakened by Gabriel pressing against him from behind. Sherlock made room for Gabe’s erection between his thighs, flexed his gracilis muscles and was rewarded with a fist around his own hardness. Gabe was whispering his usual stream of I love you’s when he was about to climax, and Sherlock, as usual, did not respond to this.

Afterwards, he slipped back into a relaxed state of drowsiness, feeling much better than earlier in the day. He was still on his side with Gabe behind him, wrapping him into a a warm embrace.

Gabe mumbled to his neck, 'I’ll miss you when I’m away,” and to that, Sherlock replied 'I’ll miss you, too’.

He was a little bit surprised by the fact that it was true.
Chapter 8

John had been wanting to text or possibly call Sherlock since the moment he woke up that morning, but the rational part of his brain had convinced him to wait. He knew Sherlock would be experiencing withdrawal symptoms, and he wanted to maximize the chances of a favourable outcome. There was enough uncertainty as it was.

How would Sherlock be reacting to John's advances by the bar, not to mention to how the night had ended? John couldn't even guess, so he had decided that the best approach would be to simply find a way to see him face to face; then he'd have to take it from there.

For a while last night, John had felt sick with worry that something terrible was going to happen to Sherlock, but managed to calm down just a bit after the somewhat reassuring conversation with Mycroft. John had phoned him up as soon as he’d left the restaurant, thankful he had kept the emergency number Mycroft had given him a long time ago, for situations just like this.

Although Mycroft seemed reluctant to give John much information, he had at least gotten the impression that this wasn't something that had been spiraling out of control for any longer period of time.

“I'll deal with this, John, thank you for your kind concern,” Mycroft had said at the end of their brief conversation.

He and Mary had been carefully avoiding each other the entire day, only exchanging a few 'here' and 'yes' and 'ok' regarding Anna. Or maybe it had mostly been John doing the avoiding. They had grabbed breakfast and lunch separately, and John had tried to make sure to move away every time it looked like he might be cornered and pressed for some sort of dialogue.

At 3 o'clock he was thankful to get a call from a colleague at the clinic, who wanted to discuss the treatment of a particularly tricky patient. He withdrew into the study to take the call, and then stayed there, pretending to work but in reality only thinking about Sherlock and last night.

At 6 in the evening, as John was doing his best to look busy with some of last week's paperwork, Mary came upstairs. Leaned against her shoulder was the half asleep baby.

“John, we need to talk.”

John had reluctantly nodded. “Ok.”

He dreaded having this conversation with her, but in a way, it would be a great relief to have it over with. Mary, with her uncanny ability to pick up on subtleties, had apparently seen his jealousy and realized that John's emotions for Sherlock could no longer be conveniently explained through the friendship filter. Or, he wondered, could she possibly have seen that moment by the bar? John found that he didn't really care that much.

Hell, all he wanted was to be able to focus fully on Sherlock. He wanted to be allowed to resume his job of keeping him safe and well, and he needed to promptly eliminate the competition that had presented itself in the form of a smug, good for nothing junkie.

At this point, John had almost entirely quit thinking about the gay or straight thing. He wasn’t getting anywhere with those thoughts, really, and all he knew was that he wanted to be with Sherlock. Be with him in every sense of those words. And whatever that made him, he had decided to not waste more effort worrying about.
If Mary was going to, perhaps, throw him out, well it wouldn't be all bad, would it. Could actually be a bit convenient that the final decision had been hers. He figured that with some effort, he'd still be able to see Anna several times a week. And when she was just a little bit older, she could stay with him overnight, as well. Maybe Mrs. Lerner could be persuaded to take on more hours.

It was a difficult situation, but hardly unheard of, he told himself. Many people got divorced, it was not the end of the world. John felt intensely that this marriage had been a mistake.

How the hell could he have been so stupid! He had rushed into a marriage with someone he barely knew, and then stayed with her, despite the terrible, terrible things that Sherlock had uncovered about her. Stayed out of duty and for the sake of the baby. How could anyone expect an arrangement like that to hold? This was the way John's thoughts had drifted throughout the day.

Now, he was waiting for Mary to say something. She was shaking her head, lips pressed together.

“But you know what John, I don't have the fucking energy to do this right now. And I can see you're refusing to do your share. As always, I could add.”

She was standing in the doorway to the study where John was still seated by the desk. She had showered, and he noticed she’d changed from lounge clothes with spots of baby drool into a flowery cotton dress and a long cardigan.

“I'm going to go to Sheila's, she invited me over. I'll bring the stroller so Anna can go to sleep there. Don't wait up.”

Sheila was one of the five mothers in Mary's neighborhood baby group. John had met her and her husband on a few occasions, and thought they had been sleep-inducingly boring.

“Alright,” was all he replied.

As soon as John heard the front door close, he picked up his phone. Text or call, that was the question. He figured it was more likely to get a reply via text, since Sherlock almost always let his calls go straight to voicemail; but then again, more likely to persuade Sherlock to meet up with him if they were talking.

Before he could change his mind, he dialed the familiar number, finding a small pleasure in typing in the numbers rather than using the speed dial.

To his great surprise, Sherlock picked up on the first signal.

"John, my dear fellow!” he exclaimed with an odd cheerfulness. "How’s your hand today?"

John was caught off guard and had to gather his thoughts.

"Erm, look Sherlock, I’m sorry things got out of control last night. But you have to know, I got very worried about you.”

"I can assure you, there’s nothing to worry about. And if you’ll forgive the nitpicking: The only thing that was out of control last night, John, was you.”

Sherlock was still speaking in that strangely articular, upbeat voice, it reminded John of the way people spoke in movies from the fifties.

He continued before John could say anything.

"It’s actually rather funny when one thinks about it. Your wife shot me, and you knocked out my boyfriend the first time you met him.”
He let out a short, forged laugh.

"Should make excellent fodder for conversation, during all those lovely double dates we’ll have. Given that we’ll accept the invitation, of course,” he said, sounding rueful. "Something tells me Gabriel might be a little bit tricky to convince."

John was scrambling for things to say to get through Sherlock’s angry wall of sarcasm. "Look Sherlock, what can I say. I’m really sorry and I get that you’re crossed with me. But you can’t blame me for being concerned, you were high, for fuck’s sake. And I… I couldn’t stand it if something terrible happened to you, you know that.”

John could hear Sherlock inhaling, getting ready to launch into his next attack. "Well. Good thing you called my brother, then. He paid us such a lovely surprise visit, just this morning actually. Perhaps 7 o’clock is a tad bit early for entertaining guests after a nice night out, but, never mind. You know how much his little lectures do delight me. I’d welcome those at any hour."

‘Us’ but not as in Sherlock and John, wow, that two letter word hit John right in the gut, even though he knew it was just how things currently were. He sat down on the edge of the bed, deliberately releasing his shoulders, silently exhaling, trying his best to reach across to Sherlock.

"Sherlock, listen, the reason I called was to say that I really enjoyed seeing you last night. And I understand you’re angry, and that’s fine, but could we please not do this on the phone? In fact, I was thinking--", John gathered some needed courage, "-if you’re not too busy tonight, perhaps you’d let me buy you dinner?"

John winced, it had come out way too much like he was asking for a date. Which, he realized, was exactly what he was doing.

"Oh. Dinner."

Sherlock grew quiet for a few seconds, it felt like five minutes to John but he decided to wait him out. When he spoke, it was in his normal voice, and for that, John was grateful.

"As a matter of fact, I was planning to pop over to Baker Street tonight, and it would be nice to not have to go to Tesco’s. You know how I hate that place. Hell on earth, is what it is.” Sherlock seemed to be momentarily lost in his thoughts again.

"I do need tea, and milk, and honey, and let’s see, some of those biscuits I like, take two packets while your at it… Toilet rolls… Hm, and if you see that Belgian chocolate, the one in the brown paper box, pick up one of those as well… Yes that ought to do it. I’ll text you if I think of anything else. See you at 8-ish then?"

John chuckled. Trust Sherlock to give you a list for his weekly shopping.

"8 it is."

In a rush, John showered and got dressed. He chose his clothes carefully, trying to look nice but relaxed. From a kitchen drawer, he got out a note pad and a pen. ‘Meeting Mike at the pub, might be late.’ He hesitated before signing. Usually they would put ‘I love you” at the end but that seemed weird now. He simply wrote ‘John’. He left the note on the counter right next to the kitchen sink, Mary was sure to see it there.

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John walked with light, happy steps up and down the aisles, collecting the things that Sherlock had
asked for. Instead of Tesco’s, he had hopped off the tube two stations earlier to get to Luigi’s, the upscale delicatessen both he and Sherlock loved. They had used to come here on the odd, unclaimed Saturday afternoon, browsing, tasting, picking up things for a nice evening in.

The memories made him smile. He knew this place so well, the lingering scents of food products from all over the world, coming together into sensory overload. It was like it had only been a week or so since he last was there, browsing the colorful jars and cans and boxes on the shelves.

After a good two minutes of searching through the vast cheese counter, he finally found the Parmigiano Vacche Rosse - the 'Red Cow” Parmesan cheese that he knew Sherlock was quite fond of.

John had planned to make another stop to pick up food from the Korean place closer to Baker Street, but as he stood there, he changed his mind. Instead of take out, he was going to load up on a variety of delicacies, perfect for Sherlock to eat while pretending not to.

Holding a large chunk of the cheese in his hand, he heard a familiar, heavily accented voice calling his name.

"John, what a pleasure! Long time no see, my friend. Tutto va bene - everything good I hope?"

John smiled to see Luigi himself, round bellied proprietor and gourmand de luxe, standing in front of him in his white apron and blue hair net.

About five months after they had started to come here on a regular basis, Luigi had ushered them into his office, closed the door and whisperingly told Sherlock about the increasingly frightening threats he had been receiving. Sherlock had sorted the matter in less than two days, and Lestrade had been more than happy to come and lock up the three men who had turned out to be running a mafia-like ‘protection’ scheme, making life difficult for small business owners like Luigi.

"Good, I’m good thanks, how are you, Luigi?"

"Couldn’t be better, John! We’re expanding, did you know that! Second location opening in Notting Hill in a month!” Luigi beamed with pride.

They talked a bit about his new business, and John silently wondered if Sherlock had been here on his own, or worse, with that bloke. But then Luigi spotted the Parmesan in his hand and lit up.

"Aspetta, John, wait right here! I have something in the back that your Signore will like!"

He returned a couple of minutes later, with a bag containing a large, paper wrapped, heavy item.

"The finest Jamon Iberico that money can buy, John! It just came in. Do you know what they feed the pigs to make it taste like this - acorns! Nothing but acorns!” He laughed and gave John a big squeeze as they parted.

John didn’t even reflect on the fact that he hadn’t felt any urge to correct Luigi in his assumption that Sherlock was his boyfriend.

At the fresh produce section, the intoxicating scent of fresh thyme hit him, and John suddenly decided to make a pasta in addition to what he had already picked up.

John was actually a quite decent cook, especially when he put his mind to it, and that he most certainly planned to do this evening. He had learned to cook the hard way, when he was 10 years old and his mum had died and his dad, in his drunken grief, had checked out from fatherhood completely. John and Harry had been helping each other learn. Sure, they had only been making
basic stuff, but still.

In an odd way, the times he’d spent with his sister in their tiny kitchen, chopping onions and boiling spaghetti, now made up some of his happiest childhood memories.

Living alone, and then in the army, he obviously hadn’t been doing a lot of cooking, but at Baker Street with Sherlock, he had enjoyed taking it up again. At first he had slavishly followed his tried and tested recipes, then eventually trying out new ones, and later getting confident enough to start improvising on his own.

It hadn’t been easy to navigate the toxic conditions and public health hazards of the Baker Street kitchen, but he had invested in the strongest disinfectant that the market could offer, and generously sprayed down the counters and everything around them before going ahead.

Sherlock had loved when John cooked for him, John knew it and that was, naturally, a major factor in his decision to make something tonight. When he had been living at Baker Street, he’d made sure to cook at least one night of the weekend. When John was busing himself in the kitchen, Sherlock would usually end up in there as well, perched up on a chair, his back leaned against the wall.

He'd have a glass of Bordeaux in his hand, nibble on things he’d steal from the chopping board, and would be more relaxed and unguarded than John ever saw him otherwise.

If John happened to have brought home a whole chicken, Sherlock would come up close to hover behind him, commenting and criticizing his technique of disjointing it, then returning to the kitchen chair. He would be chatting away about cases, telling him about odd things he’d read in his scientific journals, and making John describe rare medical symptoms and let Sherlock guess the disease.

But without exception, he’d eventually begin to entertain John with gems of scandalous information that he had deduced about people they knew.

Once it had been about a surgeon at Bart’s who Sherlock had deduced had a diaper fetish, and once about Mrs. Hudson’s friend Margaret, who apparently had been stealing unlocked strollers and then selling them on Craig’s List. John would laugh and shake his head in disbelief, and when he’d steal a glance at Sherlock, he would remind him of a stray cat, momentarily domesticated, purring in his seat.

When John thought back on those moments, it was so easy to see what he had furiously denied back then. They had been a couple. A couple in every way except the sexual, but now John couldn’t really understand what the big fucking problem had been with that, either.

The man was simply gorgeous, that much anyone could see, fit like a race horse, with those full lips, and silvery eyes you could get lost in. He was clearly capable of passion, despite the aloof exterior - what with the composing and dancing and crime solving. Furthermore, he was also, as it had turned out, attracted to men.

*So how the hell had things ended up like this?*

John picked up fresh pasta, a carton of double cream, a small cut of tenderloin and some garlic; chose a bottle of red wine that Sherlock liked, then headed for the register. Tonight he was going to make a rich, fragrant pasta dish, a perfect match for the day after. Not that he expected Sherlock to eat much, the small tidbits of cheese and cured ham would surely be enough.
However, the purpose of this exercise was not to cure a hunger. It was to instill one.

With a shopping bag in each hand and a slightly elevated pulse, John stepped out on the London streets and began to make his way to 221B Baker Street.
Things were going spectacularly bad. Sherlock had envisioned keeping up his attitude of distant nonchalance from their conversation on the phone, objectively gathering more information about what was going on with John. But for the last two hours, he had been failing miserably.

He’d had an uncomfortable, fluttering sensation in his stomach when going to get the door, but that had quickly disappeared as John had swept in with an air of buzzing confidence about him.

John had managed to get him to laugh before they’d even made it up the stairs to the flat, and then proceeded to go about with the food, all the while chatting and joking, not giving Sherlock even a moment’s respite to restore his guard.

It was surreal to see John move about in the kitchen; instinctively finding everything in the drawers and cupboards, getting the dicky old gas burner to start at first try, cleaning up the mess with a surgeon’s efficiency as he went along.

*As if he had never left.* Sherlock had allowed himself to get lost in that fantasy for a while.

By the time they had finished eating and were comfortably leaned back in the sofa, Sherlock’s last defenses had been thoroughly pulverized. It was just him and John, like it had used to be, long before everything turned so complicated. It was so easy to be in John’s presence, it made him feel good about himself.

However, Sherlock noticed how they were both meticulously avoiding to touch on anything sensitive. Mary, Gabe, last night, or the questions about the drugs that he knew John was itching to pose. Even the baby was off limits, apparently, confirming Sherlock’s suspicion that he was not the only one indulging in pretense play this evening.

Sherlock had a soft spot for red wine, but was careful not to drink too much. He strongly disliked being drunk and usually did his best to avoid it. If he wanted to escape, he much preferred the cleaner effect he could get from other substances.

Tonight, he’d had just a little more than one glass of the excellent Cabernet Sauvignon that John had brought. Although he didn’t feel intoxicated, there was definitely a light buzz in his blood, and it helped to muffle the internal soundtrack of thoughts that threatened to break the spell of this fantasy.

But of course Sherlock still noticed every little detail about John, and he had quickly picked up on the fact that there was something slightly different with John’s behaviour tonight.

He kept coming just a little bit too close into his personal space, ever so briefly, quickly
withdrawing, but then it would happen again, and again. Highly unusual behavior for John, who
normally was very observant of social boundaries.

A fleeting brush of John’s hand against Sherlock’s arm, as he reached over him for his glass.
Accidental? A moment’s touch of legs, John’s knee pressing into Sherlock’s thigh as he shifted in
the sofa, removed just as soon as it had happened, not acknowledged.

Under normal circumstances, Sherlock wouldn’t have given it much thought, but tonight, these
little things kept adding up. And then he noticed the way that John was looking at him. John was
starting to hold Sherlock’s gaze for a slightly longer than usual, and there was something new in
the way he was looking at him. Intent.

This must be what John is like in his date-mode, Sherlock realized. Predatory John. A set of
behavior patterns that had not previously been on hand for him to study. Similar to the way he had
been acting last night at the bar. Sherlock felt his heart beating faster as he tried to consolidate this
new data with all that he previously knew about John.

Married. Chose Mary. Said ’It would have changed everything, but maybe not in the way you
think’. Said ”I’m not actually gay”. Said it on so many occasions Sherlock that Sherlock had lost
track (sloppy!).

Heterosexuality exceptionally important to John’s perception of self. Never displayed any
attraction towards other men, but to a vast amount of women. Said ’You are my best friend.’

John casually stretched out his arm on the backrest behind Sherlock. Oldest trick in the book.

Sherlock couldn’t make it fit together. His throat felt tight.

He stood up from the sofa, too hasty, his leg bumped into the sofa table and caused the glasses
there to wobble precariously for a second. Thankfully they didn’t tip over. He was careful not to
meet John’s eyes.

”Sherlock? Are you alright?” John’s voice equal parts concerned and wondering.

”Yes. Of course.” Noticeable tremble in his voice. Overt behavior not congruent with words. Damn
it.

”I’m just going to, ah, excuse me-”

Sherlock reached down to grab the empty plates from the table, then quickly turned around and
tried to restrain his steps to a normal pace as he escaped into the kitchen. He put down the plates in
the sink and exhaled, gripping the edge of the counter for support.

Distance from John, helpful. One more breath. Calm down!

In through the nose, out through the mouth, just like exhaling smoke from a cigarette.
A cigarette would indeed not go amiss right now. He had a half empty pack in his coat pocket.
Could easily pop out for a minute.

But John didn’t like him smoking.
On the other hand, why the hell should that matter. John had no right to veto his personal choices.

It would matter because John would find the lingering taste a turn-off.
No! Why was he even thinking that! Stupid. John’s not gay.
Think!

Occam’s razor - what is the simplest explanation of the facts? Everything John had done so far tonight.

John was attracted to him.
All available evidence: strongly suggestive of a rapidly approaching sexual advance from John.

And in the privacy of Baker Street, nothing was standing in their way.

For years, Sherlock had been fantasizing about this. Imagined all the different scenarios of where and how. Often, he’d pictured it happening in the adrenaline rush after a solved case, how John would pin him to the wall and kiss him roughly. John’s tongue would feel hard and wet and hot against his own-

Sometimes, he had imagined John coming home late one night, slightly pissed after another date gone bad. He would simply walk into Sherlock’s bedroom, climb into his bed, crawl on all fours on top of him. He’d tuck his face in Sherlock’s neck, mumblingly ask for permission to kiss him, and Sherlock would whisperingly give it-

It had felt so good to indulge in those fantasies, and they had played a fairly major part in getting him through both isolation and torture, when he was away. But back in London again, pain and shame would always follow in their wake. Impossible, stupid, hopeless.

After John had told him he was engaged to be married, he had forced himself to stop thinking about it. He had not yet been able to completely prevent John from occasionally appearing, uninvited, in his masturbatory fantasies, or in his sleep during sexual dreams (those were the worst, uncontrollable), but he had been able to significantly reduce the frequency.

And when Gabe had shown up in his life again, he had, for the first time in years, started to experience occasional days without a single painful thought of John. It was a powerful thing, being loved by someone.

Gabe was so uncomplicated, so blissfully free from dark moods and anxiety. Easy to like. To love, even? Recently, Sherlock had begun to consider that possibility more. Now he was on a plane heading east. Clueless of what Sherlock was contemplating to do. Would react strongly if he knew. First angry, then hurt. Probably cry.

Sherlock suddenly felt like he was suffocating. Not really, just the brain interpreting it that way. Plenty of oxygen in lungs. Fight or flight response coming on. Response to a thought, not actual physical threat. The brain doesn’t discriminate. Useless reaction in this kind of situation.

Sympathetic nervous system fully activated. Racing pulse, dry mouth, trembling extremities, vertigo... Blood flow being redistributed to major muscle groups. Ancient, instinctual systems taking over. All ready to fight or flee, but fight whom, flee where? Traitorous, stupid body.
Get a fucking grip, Holmes!

Then, he heard John’s steps approaching. He came up to Sherlock, stood behind him. Sherlock did not move, just kept facing the kitchen counter, desperately trying to collect himself enough to be able to turn around to face John.

"Sherlock, what happened?"
John spoke softly. He got even closer, Sherlock could feel the scent of him. Aftershave and soap and newly washed clothes and just John. He smelled so impossibly good.
In one motion, John did two things. He closed the gap between their bodies, so that his chest was flush to Sherlock’s back; and he reached out his arms on either side of Sherlock. He placed his dry, warm hands on Sherlock’s lower arms, held them still.

Sherlock could feel John’s body heat radiating into his own body, through the fabric of his shirt, on his back, on his arms. He felt John’s heartbeat. He wondered if he was going to faint, then remembered people rarely fainted from panic.

”Sherlock.” John spoke his name again, he loved it, his name in John’s voice. But he was saying it differently now, his voice was raspy.

Oddly, John’s touch seemed to help him calm down. As Sherlock could feel his shoulders dropping, feel himself moving away from the edge of panic, he was able to notice that John’s respiratory rate had increased.

Sherlock was absolutely motionless. Was he even breathing anymore? Unsure. He felt unable to form a single thought.

”Sherlock…”, John said his name again, on an exhale. He moved his hands, let them glide down Sherlock’s shirted arms until they were resting on top of Sherlock’s tight fists, still gripping the counter.

John worked his hands under Sherlock’s, coaxed open his tight grip on the granite. He moved his hands back on top of Sherlock’s, pushed his fingers through his, intertwining them, holding his hands against the cold surface. He leaned forward, pressed more of his body against Sherlock’s.

”Did I ever tell you that you think too much?” John’s voice was a low, smiling murmur.

Sherlock tried to swallow but his throat was still too dry. He felt detached from reality, as if this was all happening in slow motion.

And then, Sherlock could feel John’s nose and mouth touching the back of his neck, just below his hair line. Not kissing, just skimming.

”Please, just let this happen.” John was half whispering against his neck.
”I’ve been a complete fool, but I will make it all right. I will fix everything. Please let me.”

John’s breath was hot against his neck, so close his skin got damp - *exhaled air has a relative humidity of 100%, due to water diffusing across the breathing passages and alveoli-*

The sensation gave him goose bumps.

Finally Sherlock managed to speak, but his voice was broken, weak.

”I don’t understand.”

John released his hands from his grip, and instead grabbed ahold of Sherlock’s shoulders. In a gentle but determined move, he turned Sherlock around in his arms, never breaking their body contact. Sherlock gathered courage to briefly meet his eyes. All he could see was warm, light, shining. John’s eyes were dark with focus.

John let his left hand travel from Sherlock’s shoulder, until it was resting on his collarbone. He moved the other to cup Sherlock’s jaw, fingers reaching behind his ear. His hands felt warm and steady. He spoke in a husky, low voice.

”Then let me explain myself.”
With his right hand, he tilted Sherlock’s head slightly down. Sherlock could see him wetting his lips with a quick dart of his tongue. John reached up and let his lips, ever so softly, touch Sherlock’s lower lip in a featherlight kiss.

Sherlock’s body was still completely frozen, but his mind was racing to the extent that he briefly wondered if this was what it would feel like to go insane. He tried to form a coherent train of thought, but all he got was fragmentized.

It was warm, and light, and it was shining and sparkling, and it was John, and his lips were pressing against Sherlock’s again, a little bit harder this time, and oh god. Oh god he was placing a light kiss on Sherlock’s upper lip, and then gently pulling on Sherlock’s lower lip, sucking it in, then releasing.

There was wetness and heat and soft, soft, soft, and then there was a flicker, ever so brief, of John’s tongue reaching in to taste Sherlock’s. It sent a razor sharp shudder down Sherlock’s spine; his breath hitched. How could this be happening?

Sherlock fleetingly considered the possibility that perhaps he HAD gone mad and maybe none of this was real? To be fair, that would be equally if not more probable that the alternative that it WAS; that John really was there at Baker Street, kissing him.

But no, he decided, there was too much specific sensory information for this to be a product of the mind, and he could taste the wine on John’s tongue, and he could feel the edge of the counter on the back of his thighs, as John pressed his upper body against his.

*John is kissing me. John wants me. He finally, finally, finally wants me.*

The thought made him dizzy, made his knees weak. Does that actually happen?, he wondered, but then had to widen his stance and lean back against the counter to support himself. This also had the effect to lessen the height difference between them, and John took immediate advantage, tilting his head to catch Sherlock’s mouth in an open mouthed kiss, rougher than before.

Sherlock found himself leaning into the kiss, couldn’t help but return it. How could he not, after waiting and hoping and dreaming about it for so long.

Oh and John was a spectacularly good kisser.

Better than Sherlock could ever have imagined, and taken into account that he has been imagining this almost every day over the last five years, well.

A soft moan escaped Sherlock’s mouth, unwillingly, he felt embarrassed about this loss of control, but then John immediately responded by emitting a throaty grunt and pulling Sherlock even closer.

"Sherlock,” John moaned against his lips.

Sherlock’s body felt electric.

"John,” he whispered.

John was still holding Sherlock’s face with one hand, and he had moved the other around Sherlock’s back, he was using it to press Sherlock’s body tighter against him.

They were both kissing with urgency now, open mouths, tongues touching and exploring. Sherlock felt his mind strangely emptied, his only thoughts were a hazy, repeating *John, John, John-"
John suddenly moved both his hands down to grasp at Sherlock’s shirt. In a rapid motion, he pulled the tucked shirt out from the trousers, let his hands glide in beneath his shirt. Sherlock was overwhelmed by the sensation of John’s hot hands stroking his naked skin, up and down his flanks, thumbs reaching out to brush over his nipples.

“Oh my god!” Sherlock gasped, but was then roused by a worrying thought.

*What if he asks about the scars?*

He arched slightly, tried to make sure John’s hands didn’t travel to his back.

The small kitchen filled with the sounds of heavy breathing and occasional gasps and whispers.

John broke their kiss, tilted his head and started to place wet kisses on Sherlock’s neck, just below his ear. He trailed his tongue up to Sherlock’s earlobe, sucked it in, licked it, then moved back to kiss his neck again. Sherlock let his head fall back a bit, exposing more of his neck. Rush after rush of excitement and desire rolled through him like giant waves.

"Oh Sherlock, you’re amazing, you’re so beautiful, you’re driving me crazy.”

"John. Oh my god, John.”

Sherlock let his hands to move over John’s back and neck, and was once again hit with how unreal it all felt, being allowed to touch John in this way and to be touched back.

John’s mouth found Sherlock’s again, only breaking briefly for a gasp of air or a whispered affection.

"You’re everything, Sherlock, you are my everything, you have to know,” John mumbled to Sherlock’s mouth.

And Sherlock was too far gone to question or analyze. He just let himself be engulfed by the feeling of John and finally getting what he had dreamt of.

Without planning to, Sherlock found he had moved his hands to hold onto John’s hipbones, where they protruded through muscles and skin and blue denim jeans. And oh dear god, John was not late to follow.

He grabbed Sherlock’s hips in the same way but harder, and oh god oh god, Sherlock noticed himself starting to sway his hips in John’s hands. So far, only their upper bodies had been touching, but now, John let his lower body lean into Sherlock as well.

And for the first time, Sherlock felt John’s cock, felt his length hot against his thigh. John was rock hard.

"Oh my god, John!” he whispered; then dared to press his thigh harder against him.

"Oh fuck!” John moaned loudly.

John reached around to grab Sherlock’s ass, both hands firmly squeezing. Without warning, he then used his grip to yank Sherlock’s hips forward, pressed him against himself.

Sherlock felt his own erection against John’s lower stomach, and got dizzy from the touch and from the thought that only thin pieces of fabric separated them.
”Ah!” Sherlock gasped, then exhaled. His eyes were half closed.

John had moved his hands away from Sherlock’s ass. Instead he was using his body weight to press Sherlock back against the counter, and he was starting to rock into Sherlock, in a slow but urgent pace. Sherlock quickly caught on, moving his hips in rhythm with John’s. He noticed his shirt buttons were being undone.

”Oh, John, oh-” He couldn’t speak, he couldn’t think. His shirt was fully unbuttoned and John was stroking his naked chest with both hands now. He leaned down and placed a wet lip on Sherlock’s left nipple.

”God! Oh!” Sherlock looked down to watch as John kissed him over his exposed chest. The sight was surreal.

Once again, Sherlock acted without thinking. He reached down and placed his palm over John’s cock, felt it hard and hot under his jeans.

”Fuck! Sherlock, fucking hell-,” John exclaimed out into the room, pushing hard into Sherlock’s hand.

He grabbed Sherlock by the shoulders, turned him away from the counter. Still furiously kissing and stroking him, John started to walk Sherlock backwards out of the kitchen.

He’s very strong, Sherlock thought, and then, What is happening?

”John?” His voice was only a trembling mess now. All of him, actually.

”I need to take this somewhere else,” he mumbled to Sherlock’s neck, as he kept coaxing and pushing him.

Towards my bedroom, Sherlock realized.

Christ.
Bedroom.
Oh my god.
John.
In my bedroom.
Sex with John.
Oh my god.
Chapter 10

Sherlock found himself lying on his back in his bed, with his open shirt flowing out on his sides. John was sitting on top of him, straddling his thighs, but was leaning over enough to keep kissing.

On their crazed walk to from the kitchen to the bedroom, Sherlock had managed to untuck John’s shirt as well, and now he had both his hands underneath it, feeling John’s hot skin under his hands. He reached up as far as the shirt would allow, and then traced downwards, slowly taking in the shapes of convex and concave; of muscles and bones playing under John’s bare skin.

John broke their frenzied kissing.

"Do you mind?" John asked in a rough voice. He had moved his hands to the front of his own shirt. When Sherlock dizzily shook his head, John started to quickly unbutton. In an amazed blur, Sherlock watched John tear off his shirt and undershirt.

John was sitting straight up on top of him now, and Sherlock heard himself gasp at the sight of John’s naked torso.

His hands slid over John’s lightly tanned skin. He was keenly observing and storing in his memory all the details of John’s upper body.

The way John’s chest was moderately hairy, his stomach almost hair free, but then had a dense line of rougher, blonde body hair. It trailed down from his belly button, downwards, appeared to continue below his trousers, where Sherlock had not yet been able to observe.

The way John’s nipples, although not as sensitive as his own, responded to a light pinch.

The way his pectoral muscles flexed, hard and well defined, as John was moving his hands over Sherlock’s body, in big, sweeping strokes.

Sherlock let his hand rest over John’s scarred shoulder for a moment.

John had moved lower, he was touching Sherlock’s hips and thighs through the fabric of his trousers.

As John’s hand was finding it’s way back to Sherlock’s stomach, it accidentally bumped into Sherlock’s prominent erection underneath.

"AH!" Sherlock exclaimed loudly. He bucked into the touch, could not help it.

John smiled and returned his hand to Sherlock’s hip, stroked it down the outside of his right thigh, then let it brush over the inside on the way back. What is he doing now?

Holding Sherlock’s gaze with intensive focus, John let his palm, in a decisive gesture, fall heavy, straight down on Sherlock’s cock.

Sherlock threw his head back, had to avert his eyes to try to regain some sense of control.

Through the thin fabric, he could feel the heat of John’s hand.
He raised his head again, stared at the sight, wondered for the hundredth time if this really could be happening. Then, another thought came up.

This is most likely the first time that John is touching another man’s dick in a sexual manner.

Sherlock suddenly got very worried to do something that would put John off. He tried to be as still as he could, even though his entire body was desperate to move.

But John didn’t seem to be anywhere close to being put off. On the contrary, he was still smiling, and now he was beginning to move his hand over the fabric, tracing the contours underneath.

John’s palm pressed over his length, and then he felt John shape his hand into a fist and give one earnest, experimental pull through the fabric.

”Ah!” Sherlock bit his lip to quiet himself.

”I like this,” John whispered, an adorable blush spreading on his already flustered cheeks.

It was too much. It required a massive effort to remain still, to not give in to his mad urge to start thrusting in John’s hand. Sherlock tried to channel the restless energy into his breathing instead, inhaled and exhaled loudly through o-shaped lips.

”Don’t hold back.” John smiled, but his eyes were dark with desire. 
”You’re so incredibly beautiful, Sherlock. Let me see you. Show me how you feel.”

John tightened his grip through the trousers, pulled up and down as best as the barrier would allow, worked up a slow rhythm.

Sherlock decided to let go. Or maybe he just couldn’t resist any longer. He exhaled, a loud, drawn out ‘ohhhh’, and allowed himself to buck up into John’s grip.

He was rocking his hips up from the bed. John kept stroking his dick. John was stroking his dick. It was incomprehensible.

John’s eyes were darting back and forth between Sherlock's face and his own hand and what it was doing. He was watching Sherlock as if he was something extraordinary.

Sherlock squirmed on the bed; moaned loudly under John’s constant touch.

”Yeah, that’s it,” John mumbled. ”You’re so fucking amazing.”

It was getting too much, too soon. Sherlock thought he might come in his pants within thirty seconds if John kept this up.

“Come here.” He stretched out his arms for John, made him stop, pulled him down to lie next to him on the bed.

John's naked torso against his own; unreal incomprehensible amazing-

For a moment, Sherlock focused all his attention on the sensation of John's hands. They were everywhere they could reach, it seemed.

Soon, they were back to kissing again, rushed and wantingly. John was almost lying on top of Sherlock now, supporting his weight on his arms.
"I want to feel more of you," John whispered to his mouth. "Can I get you out of these?" He tugged at Sherlock's trousers.

"Please," he replied, feeling breathless and disoriented.

John sat up again. He gave Sherlock's cock another teasing stroke, and smiled as Sherlock shivered under his touch. He quickly undid Sherlock's belt, button and zipper, then gripped the waistband of the trousers on both sides of his hips.

"Lift," he ordered, and Sherlock raised his ass from the bed as John slid the trousers down to his thighs, apparently careful to leave his pants untouched.

John crawled down further, got up on his feet next to the bed, and tugged at the hems to remove the trousers completely. He went on to remove Sherlock's socks, let his free hand glide up and down his calves as he went along.

Sherlock was still on his back, now wearing only his pants and the unbuttoned shirt that was still draped over his shoulders. He raised himself on his elbows, took in the sight of John standing by the foot of the bed.

"You too," he said, and Sherlock fixed his eyes on John as he undid his belt, unzipped and then unbuttoned. He climbed out of his jeans, leaving his pants on. He stepped on the garment on the floor as he tried to free his legs completely, stood on one leg at a time as he got rid of his socks. John then came back up on the bed, smiling, to lie down next to Sherlock.

He put a muscular thigh heavy on top of Sherlock's, his right hand stroked in sweeping movements across his chest, carefully avoiding to touch the large scar from the gunshot wound.

Sherlock raised his head to find John's mouth with his own, wrapped a hand around the back of John's head, touched his hair. John's hair. It had sort of a rough texture and smelled so nice. He kissed him thoroughly.

John was back on top of Sherlock, straddling him, his legs on either side of Sherlock's thighs to support his weight. Sherlock watched him in amazement.

"Gorgeous," John mumbled, as his hands moved over his almost naked body. "You are so fucking beautiful."

Sherlock tried to sit up more, wanted to touch, to kiss, but John put a strong palm on his chest, gently pushed him back down.

"Please, just let me, for a little while," he breathed. Sherlock obliged and relaxed into the bed, focused on John's hands - oh! - John's mouth - stroking and kissing him over his neck, shoulders, chest.

With his eyes closed, the sensations from it all grew even stronger.

It was John! John was doing all this to him, and no matter how he tried, he just couldn't understand it was real.

It was all he had ever dreamt of.

"No, not quite all, brother dear," a familiar voice in his mind suddenly smirked. "You wanted John to be yours, but he's not now, is he?"
Mycroft. Get the hell out of my mind! Sherlock forcefully tried to shut down this line of thought.

John was here now, kissing him senseless, and he had said he was going to fix everything, and he would. John would not let Sherlock down. John is a man of his word!

"Yes he is," he heard his brother's voice again, "and that's precisely why he won't ever be able to leave Mary and the baby. He's married now, Sherlock! He's a father!"

And Sherlock remembered his analysis of John, from years ago, their very first night, when John had shot the serial killer cabbie. A man of strong moral principle—

No!! Do not ruin this moment, for fuck's sake! Focus!

Back to John.

He raised his head to look at John, who was busy kissing and licking around Sherlock’s belly button. His warm hands caressed his flanks with perfect pressure, not ticklish, not too rough.

John was whispering things against his skin now, between the kisses. Sherlock heard words like amazing, gorgeous, beautiful—

This could be the only time I will ever hear him say that, Sherlock thought. The realities they both had tried so hard to block out; they were still there.

What were the odds of John actually leaving Mary? Leaving the baby? Sherlock knew John had a difficult relationship with his own father growing up, that he was terrified of becoming that person himself.

"You're absolutely perfect," John whispered to him, then continued to place reverent kisses on his stomach. The tenderness of John’s every move made Sherlock’s heart ache with pain.

For every second now, Sherlock felt more and more certain that this, what they had right now, might never return.

"Better enjoy it while it lasts," Mycroft whispered. "Tuck it away in your mind palace, for later, for when he's long gone and you're all alone again."

Sherlock felt a hard lump forming in his throat.

No no no no no…!

He desperately tried to force his thoughts in other directions. It didn’t work.

His eyes were beginning to sting behind his closed lids. He squeezed them hard together.

Of all the fucking things…!

Sherlock made fists of his hands and dug his fingernails into the soft flesh of his palms. The nails were too well manicured to cause any real pain.

He moved his right hand to the underside of his thigh, careful so John didn’t notice. With all his might, he pinched himself, pressed a piece of flesh together so hard it would surely leave a big mark. It still did not work.

"So," the Mycroft in his mind kept talking, "after John goes back to Mary, just how lonely will you be? I don’t expect Gabriel will take it lightly, this little adventure of yours."

In the mental image, Sherlock saw Mycroft sarcastically raising his eyebrows. "Or are you
planning to expand your web of lies even more? Getting rather vast now, don’t you think?”

A flood wave of uninvited emotions was coming his way now.  
*Hopeless, impossible, stupid-

The thought of losing John after having had him this close - losing him after knowing that this had been a real option - it was unbearable.

*How will I survive?*

Completely powerless, Sherlock felt his body contract as a sniffle escaped him. *FUCK!*

"Christ, are you - crying?"

John had immediately stopped everything he was doing. Sherlock turned his face away.

"No!"

He couldn’t hold back another sniffle. *Oh for fuck’s sake, you stupid fuck-

"You are. Oh my god, what’s wrong?"

John was up close now, too close, leaning over him. Bloody hell.

Sherlock tried to hide his face in the pillow, but since he was fully on his back, he only managed it halfway. He quickly covered his eyes with a hand. He struggled to make his voice sound normal.

"I just, eh, got something in my eye. Pollen. Bad season. Pray continue.”

"Sherlock,” John’s voice was gentle, kind, "I am hardly going to shag someone who is crying.”

Sherlock turned to lie on his side, buried his face completely in the pillow. He felt the fabric get wet.

"Sherlock, look at me.”

"I can’t.”

Sherlock could not remember the last time he had cried. He’d been dangerously close twice recently, once before John’s wedding waltz and then when he had gotten on that plane to leave for Eastern Europe.

But this kind of uncontrolled breakdown, he couldn’t even… Not since he was a little boy. Perhaps when Redbeard had been put down.

*Of all the insanely stupid things his body had done to him, this surely must be the worst betrayal of them all.*
Chapter 11

John laid down next to him, on the side to which his face was turned. He placed his palm on Sherlock’s shoulder, stroked him in gentle, calming movements.

"I am so, so sorry, Sherlock. I shouldn’t have rushed it like this.”

John got in closer, his body tight against Sherlock’s. John wrapped his arm around him, held him close, placed a soft kiss on his temple.

Sherlock felt something break inside him. There was so much love in John’s touch, the way he stroked him over his hair.

The emotions came slamming down like a full frontal collision with a double decker bus. To his utter horror, he started to sob.

"No no no”, he heard John say, as he pulled Sherlock in even tighter. "I’m so sorry.” John was holding him, rocking him slightly.

Sherlock threw an arm out, grabbed ahold of John, hugged him hard. He tucked his face into John’s neck instead of the pillow. It felt good. John was stroking him over his hair. The touch seemed to help, and little by little, it got easier to breathe again.

"Shhhh,” said John. "It’s okay. Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.”

Sherlock noticed the crying fit had stopped.

What the hell was all that about? He had gotten one chance with John, one fantastic opportunity, and he’d ruined it in the worst possible way.

What a complete idiot he was. Weak, ridiculous.

"John, I’m very sorry,” he mumbled to his neck, unable to meet his eyes. "Terrible shagging etiquette, that.” He felt absolutely mortified.

Strangely enough, John didn’t seem angry or disgusted with him. Or maybe he was just too nice to show it, being a good doctor and all.

"There’s nothing to be sorry about,” John said softly. "But I have to ask. Are you regretting this? Did I, eh, force you to do things you didn’t want to do? Because if I did, yeah, that probably makes me the worst-”

"No!” Sherlock interrupted, stealing himself to meet John’s eyes. They looked worried, not appalled. John was saying crazy things, he had to stop him.

"No. I wanted this, very much.” He decided to be brave. "I’ve wanted this for a long time, John.”

He saw John eyes widen a bit at this, but ignored it, kept on talking.

"It’s just a bit overwhelming.”

"And also, I just don’t understand,” (don’t say it, stop talking, don’t make it worse!) "because you’ve been hellbent on telling me, over years! Over years, that you’re not gay. So, what happened? Why now?”
John sighed, let go of his grip around Sherlock and sat up. For a moment, he thought John would just get up and leave. But instead he reached for the duvet at the foot of the bed and pulled it up to cover them both. He laid down next to Sherlock again, propped his head up on one elbow.

"I understand this must all seem crazy to you, Sherlock, and that the timing sucks. And I’m so sorry about that. But you know, I don’t think I realized until I, er, saw you in a, er, relationship."

John looked down. He was hiding something, but what? Something about gay sex, Sherlock deduced. The only thing in this world that could make John Watson blush, he knew that since long before. Maybe it was just too difficult for John to say. He’d figure it out later.

"Sherlock, it’s difficult for me to explain, I don’t even get it myself. I never considered myself, um, gay, but,” he paused, "but I’m very attracted to you. As you could see earlier,” he added with a laugh, blushing again.

Sherlock felt that sinking feeling return. He had to ask, even though he dreaded the answer.

"So, eh, is that what this is about, then? Exploring your sexuality?” He tried to sound neutral, looked down into the crumpled sheets, braced himself for the answer.

"Oh dear god, don’t even say that, Sherlock. No, of course not!"

Sherlock waited, but John did not volunteer anything else. He had resumed stroking Sherlock across his shoulder and arm. Sherlock needed to know.

"Then what is it, John?” He still could not bear to look up at him.

John sighed again, then buried his face in Sherlock’s hair. He felt John’s hot breath hit his scalp. John mumbled to his hair.

"I can’t stop thinking about you, Sherlock. These last few months, I’ve missed you so much I thought I’d go crazy. I feel like-”, he hesitated for a moment, spoke in a quiet voice, "like we belong together."

Sherlock was silent, tried to process it all. The words John was saying, surreal. He couldn’t have wished for anything more. And yet… How could this possibly work? It couldn’t. It wouldn’t.

No happy ending in sight, not for Sherlock at least. This crazy emotional breakdown he just experienced, it just proved the point. He would get badly hurt, had already. Sherlock abruptly untangled himself from John, sat up against the headboard.

"Couldn’t you have figured that out, oh I don’t know, let’s say maybe before you got married and had a baby?"

The words came out more vicious than he had planned, but he was feeling angry all of a sudden. He kept on.

"Because John, to be honest here. I’ve waited years for you to come around. But when you got married, I decided that I had to let go. Okay? So forgive me for finding it a bit ironic, this little change of heart of yours."

He crossed his arms, kept them tight across his chest, looked straight at John. John seemed surprised, maybe by the sudden turn of emotions, well screw that.

"What do you mean?”, said John, almost whispering. "What do you mean, you waited - years? For
me?” He looked completely confused.

"Oh for god’s sake, John. How stupid can you be?"

"No, what! I really don’t get it. Are you really saying..?"
John was shaking his head, slowly, he was staring at Sherlock as if he didn’t believe him. Sherlock just stared back, raised his eyebrows in an annoyed gesture.

"Oh fuck,” said John. "You actually mean it.”
His face was tightly controlled and his eyes unyielding. Sherlock had always thought of it as John’s military expression.

"Oh Sherlock,” John sighed, briefly closing his eyes. "Why didn’t you say something?"

"For fuck’s sake, John!” Sherlock was talking through his teeth now, fighting an urge to get up, move about, maybe break something.

"You keep telling me that I should have said something! What, why! Because you gave me so much HOPE?” Sherlock was suddenly feeling very angry.

"Hi, I’m John, the straightest bloke in the history of mankind! Doctor John ‘I’M NOT GAY’ Watson! My God John, you should have that tattooed onto your forehead really, would save you the trouble of saying it. Then again, now that you have Mary, I guess you don’t need it.”

They were both sitting straight up now, on each side of the mattress, with as much distance between them as the bed would allow. John shook his head.

"Sherlock, please don’t do this. I’II willingly admit, I’ve made so many mistakes I’ve lost count, but I don’t think it’s really fair to lay all of this on me. To be honest, I think I wanted you from the first day we met, but you know what Sherlock?”

Sherlock just kept staring at him. John seemed to be picking up steam now, there was undisguised anger in his voice as he kept on.

"YOU made it abundantly clear that you were NOT interested, alright? Married to your work, those were your exact words because I remember them very well, thank you. And then you repeatedly told me that love was for losers, that you were above all that shit, and then! And then! You left me!”

Sherlock felt a little bit jolted by the sudden outburst of aggression from John. He intensely regretted having brought this up.

"Sherlock - you made me watch you kill yourself and then you let me grieve, for two bloody years!”

"When you were gone-,” John continued, his hands in tight fists now.

"Losing you was the worst thing that I have EVER been through. I was so fucking angry with you Sherlock, that you could do something like that to me, I just can’t-”

He was clenching and unclenching his fists, and Sherlock wondered briefly if John might hit something. Probably not him, though.

"And then when I’ve finally managed to get up on my feet, you show up like it was all a big joke! I know I said I forgave you, and I did, but I think you should know. You let me go through hell
every bloody day and every bloody night, thinking you were dead and that I should have seen a way to stop you from…”

John’s voice broke, he cleared his throat and continued.

“One word, Sherlock, one word to let me know you were alive, that’s all I would have needed. But no, you were too busy jet-setting around the world and just couldn't be bothered.”

”I couldn't risk it,” said Sherlock quietly, but John was too fuming now to notice.

”And everybody else knew! Mycroft knew, Molly knew, the entire fucking homeless network knew, but how I felt apparently didn’t matter!”

John paused and drew a sharp breath, like he suddenly came to think about something.

"Fuck. Just tell me Sherlock. Did Gabriel know as well?”

Sherlock stilled, his eyes fixed steadily on his the duvet draped over his thighs.

"Oh my fucking god, of course he did! Fuck! If I had only realized the extent- You sit here and basically tell me that you loved me, yeah, but this rather contradicts it, don’t you think! I must have meant nothing to you!”

At this, Sherlock sprung to life. He was so angry he could hardly breathe.

"What?? Nothing…? I DIED for YOU, John. It was the only way to save you from Moriarty. He had snipers on you! On you and Lestrade and Mrs. Hudson. I spent two years in exile, doing things I had never done before. I… I made a mistake in Serbia, a big one and they got me John. I have scars all over my back but I was willing to pay that price if it would keep you safe. And I thought I was going to die, and sometimes I wished that I would, but the thought of coming back to you kept me going. And -”

John interrupted him, his voice was trembling with held back rage.

“Snipers and Serbia? What the hell are you talking about? You never said anything about… oh. Oh Sherlock. You are lying, aren’t you.”

John was smiling, slowly shaking his head, but his eyes were shooting fire.

"You are trying to manipulate me into feeling sorry for you. If you’re lying about this, I swear to god I am actually going to kill you. What scars, show me then!”

Sherlock felt like he wanted to hit John, shout at him, shake him. Instead, he just turned his back to him, sat on his knees on the mattress. Slowly, he let the open shirt glide down off his shoulders, reached his hands back to free himself from the sleeves, took it all off. He kept his eyes closed.

"Oh fuck,” John gasped behind him. "Oh my god, Sherlock. I had no idea…”

There were some rustling from the sheets, and then John was kneeling right behind him. He felt John’s hand, carefully reaching out to touch the scarred skin on his back.

"I am so sorry,” he whispered. "I am so very, very sorry, Sherlock.” Sherlock was still and silent. John kept touching over his back, examining the white and red marks.

"That you had to go through this-” John’s voice broke. He reached his arms under Sherlock’s, hugged him close, then began to kiss the scars on his back.
"I’m so sorry. I swear, if I’d been there with you, I would have killed them. Killed them with my bare hands."

John was placing more kisses along his back, as if it could make the scars go away. He then wrapped his arms around him, held him impossibly tight. Sherlock squirmed to turn around on the bed, stretched out his long legs on each side of John, and hugged him back.

"Let me make this alright again,” John mumbled to his ear. ”If you want me, I will spend every moment I have to try to make this up to you.”

Sherlock leaned back his head to look at John. John’s eyes were wet.

"I want you.” His mouth found John’s, and they kissed, slowly. And just like that, the shiny, sparkly and warm was back again; this time, without the misery from before.

After a while, John gave Sherlock a hard push to make them both lose balance, and Sherlock laughed when they rather clumsily hit the mattress.

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They had laid next to each other, just kissing, for so long that Sherlock’s lips had started to feel sore. It was dark outside. At some point, John had reached over him to turn off the bedside lamp. The only light in the room came from the street lamps outside.

Sherlock was completely exhausted from the emotional roller coaster of the last 24 hours. His eyelids felt heavy like lead. He tucked his face in John’s neck again, felt the soothing rhythm of his pulse. John was stroking his hair. He let his eyes fall shut.

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"Sherlock."

John was whispering softly, stroking his arm.

"I need to leave. I fell asleep. It’s past 2 in the morning.”

Sherlock felt a pang rip through his chest.

"Stay. Please stay.” He reached out a hand, heavy from sleep, to grab John’s wrist.

"I want to, more than anything. But you know I can’t. I will deal with this Sherlock, I promise you. I’ll fix this.”

Sherlock reluctantly let go of John.

"When will you come back?"

John was quiet for a moment, seemed to be thinking.

"Tomorrow night, okay? I need to go in to work in the morning, but I’ll leave early to talk to- It might take a while, but I’ll be back tomorrow night.”

"Alright.”
John wrapped his arms around him again, placed a single kiss on his lips.

Sherlock waited until he heard the front door close, then pulled the duvet up over his head. The bed felt empty without John, but he could still feel his lingering scent on the pillow. He drifted back into sleep. John.

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Sherlock was awakened by his phone chiming. He squinted his eyes to the bright morning light, fumbled to get the phone from his bedside table. John?

'Hi babe, at the hotel now, flight was quick. You should come with me next time, the Mandarin is swell as always. You would like the bed ;). Miss you already. xx'

He closed the text, let the phone fall back down on the table, ducked under the duvet again.

This was going to be a difficult day to get through.
Mary had been asleep when John got back home, and she was still sleeping when he left for work early that morning. Before walking downstairs, he had spent a long moment by Anna’s crib, just watching the baby girl as her tiny chest rose and fell in birdlike breaths. She was so peaceful, so unaware.

It was still hard to grasp, the fact that he was actually a dad, the father of this little human being. She was so utterly dependent upon them; well mostly on Mary of course, but having grown up with a good for nothing father, John knew first hand that dads matter, too. What would happen when he and Mary were no longer living together?

During the train ride into work, John relaxed his head against the metal wall and closed his eyes. He had only managed to get about three hours of sleep but didn’t feel tired, just oddly revved up.

It was like his blood was carbonated, he felt all fizzy inside. When he caught his own reflection in the window across the aisle, he realized he was smiling. Sherlock.

Not in his wildest dreams could he have imagined how last night had turned out. He had expected a lot more trouble to get to this point, hadn’t at all planned to take it even remotely as far.

But last night, with Sherlock and him alone again, it had all felt so incredibly right.

He had pushed forward much more aggressively than he had meant to, spurred on by noticing that Sherlock didn’t seem to resist. Mostly, he had appeared confused, but John had gotten a response for every little move he had made. It had been so surprisingly easy.

From the first minute with Sherlock yesterday, it had been hard to take his eyes off him.

John had caught himself staring at that perfect mouth, imagining what it would be like to touch those lips with his own, only to then realize he hadn’t heard a word of what Sherlock had been saying.

And surely Sherlock must have noticed his gaze, when it stuck for the tenth time that evening on his neck, or on the skin of his chest, bared where the two top buttons were undone.

It was an odd experience, to go from casually interacting with your best friend, to suddenly not being able to look at him without imagining some sexually tinged scenario.

But all John had thought about last night, was that if he in some way could win Sherlock over, he would stop at nothing to do so.

Then, things had just spiraled out of control, so fast, turned insanely hot.

John kept getting flashbacks from the kitchen and from Sherlock’s bedroom. It had been… unlike
anything he’d ever experienced. He couldn’t stop fantasizing about it.

The way Sherlock’s tongue had flickered against his own, inside the warm wetness of Sherlock’s mouth. The way his lean, strong body had rocked up against him as John pressed him down on the bed. The gasp he had let out when John first dared to put his hand over his cock, found it hard underneath those thin trousers.

This was all John had been thinking about during his taxi ride back home, and he had fallen asleep, exhausted, next to Mary, filled with fantasies of what it would be like to take it further next time-

However, last night, Sherlock had begun to cry. It made John quite uncomfortable to think about, even though he was fairly certain that the reason behind it had been some sort of emotional overload rather than regret.

Still, it had been a clear indication that he had forged ahead, moved too fast. Although it had led to them talking about stuff that John knew they should have acknowledged a long time ago. He reluctantly admitted to himself that it was a good thing it had come up.

But what if? What if they’d had that conversation, right when Sherlock had returned. How would things have turned out?

Would he still have married Mary? And what about the other stuff? If he had known, known for sure, that Sherlock not only preferred men but also was human enough to want sex, even love.

If Sherlock had ever indicated that he had those kind of feelings for him - how would he have reacted to that knowledge? It was hard not to wonder, and it hurt to think about.

Although, he reminded himself, the other thing that had come up last night was much, much worse.

He winced every time Sherlock’s scars popped up in his mind. As an ex army doctor, John had immediately recognized it for what it was - marks of torture.

The long scars from repeated beatings, probably with objects like sticks or rods of some sort. The small, circular indentations of cigarette burns, red and deep, scattered randomly across the pale skin on his back.

John had seen it before, but only as slides on a powerpoint presentation, in preparation of his deployment, at a lecture aimed to teach him about the things he might encounter.

Seeing these wounds on a person he loved, that turned out to be an entirely different thing.

At some point, he would have to get Sherlock to talk about what he had gone through. Had there been other types of abuse as well? He knew all too well that many forms of torture did not leave visible scars.

For the first time, John allowed himself to think this thought to the end. Mock executions were common, he was aware of that. The horrible practice of water boarding. Rape.

John felt sick, had to take a few deep breaths to ground himself.

Sherlock. So impossibly strong, but also, as John was rapidly beginning to learn, so surprisingly vulnerable. How had all this affected him?

And then he had returned, and John had greeted him with a push to the floor, right on those fresh wounds on his back, and followed up with a headbutt to break his nose.
John had to stand up from his seat, move about, to deal with the flood of guilt and shame that came over him.  

But I couldn’t know! he told himself. Sherlock had treated it like a joke. He showed no regard at all for what he had put me through.

John wondered if Sherlock had realized during their talk yesterday just how badly John had fared during his time away. Most likely not, he thought.

Even though Sherlock seemed to have progressed, learned a lot more about emotions, his own as well as others’, he still was, well, Sherlock. Certain things one would take for granted from other people, just couldn’t be expected from him.

John let his mind drift to what it had been like, during those 18 months or so after Sherlock had died. He had never told anyone about this; not Mary, not his therapist, but he had been so very close to the end of his rope.

The pain and guilt and emptiness he had felt after Sherlock’s death had been worse than anything he had ever experienced. Worse than the war, worse than coming back to civilian life after the war. Worse than when his mother had died.

Each day had been a massive effort to make it from morning to evening, to put one foot in front of the other, and then repeat. To try to carry on when all he wanted was for it all to end. The nights, though, had been worse.

He was taking medication to be able to fall asleep, but each night he would wake up in the early morning hours in a cold sweat, from the same nightmare about Sherlock falling, falling, falling; always startled awake with an anguished scream the second before Sherlock hit the pavement.

He had begun to make preparations. Sorted out his papers, closed his pension account, written down his pass codes on a piece of paper and stuck it to the fridge. His gun was waiting in the bedside table drawer, loaded.

But then he had met Mary, and she had smiled at him with intelligent, sparkling eyes, and for the first time in a year and a half, John had felt a small glimpse of hope. She’d been his salvation.

John was pulled out of his thoughts by a voice calling out his station as the next upcoming stop. He tried to focus on the meeting that awaited him at the clinic, just an hour from now.

He dreaded it the way he always did when he had to be the bearer of bad news, and even more so when it was a young person, like this.

The radiologist had called John last Thursday about the results, and now John had to be the one to tell the young man that the pain in his stomach indeed was something to worry about.

Not that worry ever had helped anyone, John absentmindedly thought as the train slowed to a halt at the platform.

At lunchtime, John was sitting by his desk with a much needed cup of black coffee in his hand. The meeting had, as expected, been hard, and right after he had seen seven more patients, the usual steady stream of sore throats and allergic rashes.
Now he was done dictating the records, and finally had time to take out his phone. Two texts to be sent. Always a man of discipline, he began with the hard one.

'Mary, I agree that we need to talk. I’m sorry I avoided you yesterday. I’ve cancelled my late afternoon meetings, hope to see you in a few hours.'

He decided it would have to do. He pressed send.

Next one, easier.

'You’re all I can think about today. You are amazing. Can’t wait to see you again tonight.' He hesitated, considered for a moment how to sign. He wrote, 'Always yours, John'.

A minute later, his phone vibrated once, then shortly after, once again.

The first reply was from Mary. It said simply, 'ok'.

The second one was from Sherlock, John got all fluttery inside, felt his pulse raise just at seeing Sherlock’s name on the screen.

'Hurry up. SH' was all it said. John smiled, re-read it again and again.

'I will. JW' he replied, still grinning as he was sitting in his office, surrounded by medical charts and instruments and prescription pads. Things belonging to a responsible adult, but today, his heart was decidedly that of a love sick teenager’s.

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It had taken much longer than expected to make his escape from the clinic. John's phone had kept ringing and colleagues knocking on his door, with lots of, ”Do you have a minute?” and ”Just real quick before you leave.”

And then a mother had walked in with her baby, soaring fever, and he had to call in to the hospital to make sure someone would see them right away.

After that, the young man from the morning had phoned, understandably still upset, asking lots of questions that John had done his best to answer both truthfully and still as encouraging as he could manage.

It was early evening when John was finally taking the last few steps to his front door. On the train, he had rehearsed what he needed to say.

He felt calm, confident in his decision and relieved to finally be doing this. It was the right thing, of that he had no doubt anymore.

Much later, John was sitting on the kitchen floor, wondering what the hell he was going to do.

It had begun civilized enough. The baby had been sleeping upstairs, and he had sat down with Mary, she in the chair, he in the sofa, both with a cup of tea in front of them.

John had launched into his prepared speech. He was careful to leave Sherlock’s name out of it, even though the events two nights ago was the trigger for this whole talk and they both knew it. But it felt easier to just focus on how his feelings had changed.
"I’m sorry Mary, but I just don’t feel the way I ought to,” he had said. “I think you deserve better.”

He had expected her to get upset, of course he had. Expected her to cry, to yell at him, to be angry. After all, that was the way the girlfriends he had broken up with in the past had reacted.

But when he was finished explaining how it wouldn’t be right to stay together, and how sorry he was, and how he hoped they could remain good friends and how committed he was for them to be there for Anna together, Mary had stared blankly at him, dead quiet.

Then she had begun to laugh.

She had been laughing so hard she seemed incapable of stopping. John didn’t know what to do.

"Oh John,” she eventually gasped, still chuckling. ”You’re killing me. So adorable.”

"What?” he had said, eyebrows furrowed. "Just what the fuck do you mean?”

"You actually think you’re going to have a relationship with Sherlock! Oh it’s just too much!” she said, and started to laugh again.

"I never said-” John frowned, irritated.

"Oh but we both know that’s what this is all about, John. I told you in the taxi, I saw it. Everyone could see it. You had jealousy written all over your face. And then you went to see him last night, of course, and now you think-” she paused, shook her head, smiling.

"And now you honestly think you’re going to leave me - leave your WIFE - who just gave birth to your CHILD - to be with him! John, I never took you for such a fool.”

"Just shut up, Mary.” John sharpened his voice. ”How I may or may not feel about Sherlock is actually irrelevant. Let’s focus this talk on us instead.”

"Don’t be absurd, of course it’s relevant,” she said with a shrug. ”But anyway, it won’t happen.”

She causally leant back in her chair, sipped on her tea.

"What won’t happen?”

"You, Sherlock. Seriously, how can you be so daft? Can’t you see what’s going on here? It’s just a game to him. Oh come on, John.”

She looked at him with pity in her eyes.

Despite knowing better, John found it impossible to leave Mary’s words unchallenged.

"You should just stop talking right now, ok! You don’t know Sherlock the way I do. And I’m so sorry for not realizing this earlier, but yes, I love him and he loves me. And I cannot keep on living a lie. Our marriage will never work, I thought it might but I was wrong.”

He caught his breath, then kept on.

"I’m truly sorry for putting you through this, Mary, but to be fair, this marriage didn't exactly get off to a flying start, with you lying about your entire identity and then almost killing my best friend!”

Mary tilted her head and pouted her lower lip like John was a sad child or a lost puppy.

"I am sure that’s what Janine thought too, you know."

"Don’t. Don’t bring Janine into this, that was a completely different thing."

"Yeah, you tell yourself that, John." She rolled her eyes. "Do I really have to spell it out to you! Just listen to me now, because I honestly have your best interest in mind."

Mary leaned forward again, spoke in a softer voice. John steeled himself.

"John, you were there too, at the restaurant. Didn’t you see his boyfriend?"
She laughed, a hard, short puff of air.

"Don’t take this the wrong way, because you’re handsome enough, John, but please. That guy’s Hollywood pretty! You can’t honestly think you can compete?"

She had her arms crossed, a cold smile glued onto her face.

"Oh, can’t you see! Sherlock’s just having some fun with you. I bet he wants to see how far he can get, now that you’re married."

"Although," she added pointedly, "you seem to have forgotten about that little fact."

"Stop it, Mary, just stop it!" John said firmly. "I don’t want to hear another word about this from you."

"Oh but you should," she said. "You know what I think? I think he is just - bored. He’ll toss you away like a dead mouse when he’s finished playing with you."

Mary locked her eyes on John’s. "Sherlock’s a psychopath, how could you let yourself forget that? Manipulation, that’s like his core competence."

"Let’s just forget this whole thing now and watch some telly, okay John?"
She sat down next to him on the sofa and turned the TV on. Just like nothing had happened.

John looked at her, attempted to refocus. Damn it!

He tried to shake off the uncomfortable feeling that had come over him. Could there be any truth in what she was saying?

Well, logically, yes, although he hated to admit it. Sherlock did enjoy manipulating people and was very good at it. John had seen it first hand so many times.

But… he thought back on last night. And then he decided to put the fear aside.

What he had felt from Sherlock had been real, and he was not going to let himself get sidetracked.

"Mary. You need to listen to me.” He took the remote, turned the TV off again.

"I don’t know how to say this any clearer. I want this marriage to be over. I am going to pack a bag and go over to Baker Street tonight. We’ll figure out the details later. I’m sorry, but this is how it’s going to be.”
And that was when things had really gone to hell.
At first, Mary had just stood up. Without saying a word, she’d walked out into the kitchen. John could hear the tap running, and the clinking of porcelain as she put her cup into the dishwasher.

When she had returned, her previous cool had been replaced by full on, raging mad.

She had screamed and yelled, thrown things around and gone on and on about how John was, basically, the worst piece of scum on earth. This, however, John had been more prepared for, so in a way he found it easier to handle.

He knew perfectly well how to respond to not aggravate a situation like this, and he felt silently proud of himself for the way he managed to counter her attacks with a deescalating attitude.

"I really understand that you feel that way, Mary, and I’m very sorry, but as I said, I can’t help the way I feel," he had repeated, again and again as she went on.

Eventually, it seemed to work, because she calmed down and stopped shouting. She sat down in the arm chair again, rubbed her face, exhaled. John remained silent, took the opportunity to regroup and collect himself.

He was feeling increasingly stressed about the time. This had taken much longer than he had expected, and it didn’t seem likely that he was going to be able to leave within the next hour or so.

John knew he had to leave Anna with Mary tonight, and it was imperative to make sure she was stable enough to care for the baby properly. No matter how much he wanted to, he just couldn’t rush this.

He really needed to get in touch with Sherlock, let him know why he was taking so long. It was getting late, and he was probably beginning to wonder by now.

However, he couldn’t really call him, since that would surely set Mary off on a new rant. But, he figured, he could at least send a quick text.

John reached for his phone, he was certain he had put it on the sofa right next to him, but couldn’t find it. He turned around, looked. No phone. He got up, slid his hand between the cushions. It wasn’t there. Where the hell had he left it?

"Are you looking for your phone?" Mary said with an unexpectedly nice voice, glancing up from where she was in the arm chair across from him.

Surprised, John turned to her.

"Yeah, have you seen it?"

"Sure. It’s on the kitchen counter."

"Oh. Thanks," he said, briefly wondering when he had managed to put it there. But, never mind. He took the few steps to the kitchen.

It took him a while to see it. As Mary had said, it was on the counter.

Emerged in a glass of water.
"What the..!" John leaped forward to pull it out of the glass, dried it off on his shirt, pressed a few buttons. As expected, the phone was completely dead. He ripped out the battery, dried it off, put it back in. Didn’t help.

"You’re fucking mental!" John shouted. Mary had walked after him, now she was standing casually leaned against the door frame to the kitchen.

John felt a shiver of fear trickle down his spine. This was really crazy behavior.

"Give me your phone!", he demanded, his voice stern, controlled.

"Oh, I’m afraid I’ve misplaced it,” she said, smiling viciously.

John had never laid a hand on a woman, never in his life, and albeit very tempting, he wasn’t planning to start now. However, he walked up to her, in two brisk strides, got in really close, his hands in tight fists.

"Give me the fucking phone!” he shouted in her face.

"I told you John, it’s not here. I don’t know where it is. But anyway, you won’t be needing it, because you are going nowhere tonight. Okay?

"You’re insane, Mary. If you think you can stop me from seeing Sherlock, you’re badly mistaken.” He was shaking now, controlled rage bubbling up to the surface.

"Oh John,” she said, suddenly much more subdued. “I know I can't stop you from going to see Sherlock tonight, if that's what you really want.”

John exhaled, slightly relieved that she perhaps was somewhat more reasonable than the crazy phone thing had suggested.

“Good,” he said, trying to keep a pleasant enough tone. “Thank you for not making this even more difficult than it already is.” He searched for her eyes, pleading.

“Because I will go, Mary, I'm sorry, but I just feel this – us, this marriage – it's just too damaged to be saved. I'm truly sorry for hurting you.”

“Of course I'm not going to stand in your way.” She smiled faintly. “Just, you know - just know, that for every choice you make, there’s a different… shall we call it consequence?”

John’s heart stopped.

"What - the - fuck - do - you - mean?” John almost whispered to her.

"You seem extra slow tonight, John. Let me explain it to you clearly.” She paused, met his staring eyes.

"It comes down to a very simple choice. You can go see Sherlock tonight, but the consequence of that particular choice is: You will never see me… or your daughter again.”

John felt his body starting to tremble, his mind speeding to try to deal with the threat that just had been put on the table.

"That’s not even legal,” he said slowly. “I have a right to see my child. You can’t do that.” It was difficult to breathe.
"You seem to have forgotten who you’re dealing with here, honey.” She straightened her back, rolled her shoulders for a second.

“You're bluffing. You wouldn't do that,” he said, praying she would back down. She didn’t.

"Try me. Just you fucking dare to try me, John.”

John felt an odd sense of detachment coming over him, which was tremendously helpful since it allowed him to take a step back from this situation.

As a part of his military training, he had been taught both theory and practice of how to deal with psychological threats. He tried to bring to mind the basics of what he'd learned.

How to show your firm stance while also being careful not to escalate the conflict. How to try to connect emotionally with the opponent, to level the field.

“Mary,” he began. “I think I know to a great extent what you are capable of. I wouldn't dream of underestimating you. And I think you were right in what you said, about how that's a reason why I fell for you.”

He tried to give her a careful smile. “But you know what? I don't know why. I don't know why you had to become so strong. And I think it’s about time that we talked about that.”

For a moment, he could see a bit of hesitation flicker in her otherwise steely cold eyes. Good, he was on the right track then.

“Regardless of what you think, Mary, I'm not your enemy. And I don't see you as my enemy, either. We have a daughter together, for christ's sake! And I love her, and I want to be a proper dad. And I want to be there for you too, even if I can't, you know, be with you in the way we both intended.”

John slowly lowered himself down on the floor with his back against the wall. He gave the cold tiles next to him two short pats.

“Come sit, Mary,” he asked her. “Let's go about this as the persons we both want to be.”

She watched him, guardedly, then moved a bit closer. John tried to stifle a big sigh of relief when she finally slumped down next to him.

“What do you want to know?” she said, blankly staring in front of her.

“Let's start with this,” he said. He held out his right hand to her, and she turned to look.

“Hi,” he said with a soft smile. “I'm John. What's your name?”

He saw her eyes fill with tears, and as she blinked, one made it's way down her cheek, then followed by another.

And there, on the kitchen floor in the shiny new house that had never felt like home to John, Mary took his hand and told him her real name.

After that, she just kept talking. Completely unprompted, the words kept flowing out of her.

John sat back and listened as the woman he had married told him, for the first time, about her past.

It was a story of a childhood so sad he wanted to cry for her, cry for the little girl she once had
been. A story of neglect and abuse, of a lonely child who had the choice of fending for herself or going under.

Of failed interventions from incompetent social services, of an endless string of foster homes, and later, of so called boyfriends with nothing but bad things on their agenda.

Of growing up in a world where nobody could be trusted to help you.

Of eventually transforming into a person so strong that no one would ever be able to get to you again.

John found himself completely lost in her story, forgetting all together how they had even ended up there, on the cold kitchen floor.

Mostly, he listened, and sometimes he asked questions to clarify. When she had finished and gone quiet, he felt achingly sad. He couldn't think of a single appropriate thing to say.

Make or break, he briefly thought to himself before leaning over to pull her into a gentle hug. She tensed up but then relaxed, and he felt her thin arms wrap around his back.

They sat like that for a long time, John felt strangely empty inside but also relieved. After a while, he broke the embrace, but moved his hand to catch hers.

She had insisted that she wanted him to keep calling her Mary, said it made her feel better about herself than she ever had with her old name. So, that was the name he used when he finally spoke.

“Mary. Thank you for sharing this with me. I know how much courage it took.” He gently squeezed her hand.

She met his eyes, he could see there was no anger left, only fatigue and sadness.

“I am so sorry I can't love you the way you want me to, or the way you deserve. But if you'll let me, I would be honored to be your friend.”

“I'd like that,” she whispered, smiling faintly between the tears that were once again trickling down her cheeks. “I'd like that very much.”

She got up from the floor, winced as she stretched out the pain from sitting on a hard kitchen floor for way too long. John hadn't even reflected on his own discomfort, but now felt it and then did the same.

Mary walked over to the oven, opened it.

“Here,” she said, reaching out her phone to him, with a defeated look on her face. “It's late. I imagine you want to call him.”

At that, it was John's turn to well up. He walked up to her, pulled her into a hug.

“Thank you, Mary.”

She gave him a tired smile. “This won't be easy for me, John. And it doesn’t mean I’m not still quite angry with you.”

“I know,” he said.

“But whatever.” She exhaled. “Right now, I need to sleep. You can leave the phone on the
staircase when you go. And call me before you come over here again, I'd like to be prepared, yeah?"

John nodded.

“Of course. Call me anytime if there's anything. I’ll, eh, get a new phone first thing tomorrow.”

“Sure. Good night, John. Or should I say goodbye.” She turned around and walked out of the kitchen, he heard her tired steps as she retreated to the upper floor.

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John still felt taken over by an extremely strong sense of detachment. Then he remembered the phone in his hand, pressed it to make the screen light up.

He was jolted alive by the wave of panic that hit him when he looked at the screen. The clock showed 01:10. *Oh god. Sherlock.*

John frantically dialed the familiar number. It went straight to voice mail. He hung up, dialed again, then remembered Sherlock would think it was Mary calling him.

With trembling hands, he typed a quick text.

'It’s John, please answer. My phone’s not working.'

He sent it, then dialed again. Voicemail. He left a message this time.

"Sherlock it’s me, I’m so sorry it took so long, it’s been a bit crazy over here but all is good now. Please pick up.”

His heart was now pumping so hard he could feel the vibrations against his sternum. *How the hell could he let himself lose track of the time!*

An awful sense of dread and worry was starting to build up in his stomach. *Oh dear god.* Sherlock must think he had just ditched him. What if he had tried to get in touch, called or texted John and gotten no reply.

*Shit, how could he not have thought about this earlier!*

He called for a car, tried to call Sherlock again, and then typed a new message.

'I’m coming over now.'

John deleted the texts from Mary’s phone before leaving it on the staircase as she had asked.

He grabbed his jacket and ran out the front door. The 15 minutes before the car showed up was pure torture. Finally it arrived.

"Baker Street 221, please hurry!"
Chapter 14

It was so quiet in the Baker Street flat that Sherlock could hear his own respiration. Inhale, exhale, repeat. Elevated rate, elevated pulse.

It was half past ten and John had not shown up. Had not even had the guts to send him a simple text to tell him he wasn't going to, either.

*Stupid. Hopeless. Stupid stupid stupid.*

It had been a given, really it had. He'd known that this was going to happen, one way or another, but that hadn't been enough to hold him back. Oh no. Of course he'd had to push ahead anyway, into things that were bound to come back to hurt him. *Modus operandi of Sherlock Holmes.*

This whole day, nothing but waiting. He had dragged himself out of bed at noon, after many sleepless hours spent underneath the covers.

The text to Gabe, no way to avoid sending it or he'd begin to worry. Kept it brief, pretended that everything was fine. More lies. They were up to his throat by now. Drowning in a sea of lies. What a way to go.

The worst part was that he had actually thought John was going to do it. Had allowed himself to trust that John was going to show up, a bit roughed up but relieved to be there.

Had allowed himself to fantasize about picking things up where they had left them last night.

With all his great mental abilities, Sherlock was used to being right. He was almost always right. But not about things like this. Never had been. *Why the hell had he expected to be this time?*

*Fuck it.*

From late afternoon, he'd spent hours by the window, watching the street below for signs of a taxi slowing down. For signs of John.

When he thought about John, he could also feel the scent of him, just as if he were there right next to him.

*Turquoise green.* That was the color of John in Sherlock's mind. Turquoise green before his eyes, when he closed them.

At seven, the uncomfortable feeling in his chest had started to grow stronger.

At eight, he couldn't sit still anymore. He was sinking in quicksand, but he couldn't leave, what if John did come after all. It was getting dark outside, and inside, he hadn't bothered with any of the lamps.

At nine, he had run out of cigarettes, having chain smoked the eleven he had left.

At ten, Sherlock was sitting in his chair with his phone in hand, considering.

He had briefly wondered whether something could have happened to John. Mary was, after all, a dangerous person. An ex assassin, even.

Sherlock had forced himself to try to distance himself from his emotions enough to evaluate that
possibility. He had decided that the risk of her hurting John was exceedingly low. John was all she wanted.

*Who could argue with that.*

No use in kidding himself, he'd decided. If John didn't show up, it wasn't because he couldn't. *It was because he didn't want to.*

Oh how that thought hurt. Ripped right through him, like that bullet had. Just in a different kind of way.

*Your own bloody fault.* Should have known. *Had* known, but chosen to ignore it.

*Idiot!*

He stared at the last text from John, from earlier. What had happened between then and now? Gone home to Mary, realized he couldn't leave her and the baby. Responsibility, duty.

Maybe he loved her more than Sherlock had realized. Maybe a woman was what John ultimately needed and wanted. Not gay, after all.

But why hadn't he let him know? Unlike John to do so.

Then again, this entire situation was unlikely. Guilt, perhaps. Would probably try to call him in the morning, apologize profoundly. *“I hope we can still be friends,”* things along that line.

He hesitantly typed something in the white space – deleted – tried again – deleted.

It all just sounded pathetic, needy, accusing. Dull.

He closed down John's text.

It was getting difficult to remain in his own skin. Familiar feeling. A familiar solution to this particular state. Tempting.

And at some point, as always before, the sinking feeling escalated into a whirling, drowning sensation. It was like a deafening buzz in his ears.

*Unbearable. It was getting absolutely unbearable.*

On a whim, he decided to call Gabe.

“Sherlock.” His voice was thick from sleep. *“It’s only four thirty here, can I call you back in two hours?”*

It took Sherlock a millisecond too long to reply.

“Oh, sorry. Sure, that’s fine.”

“Is everything alright?” Worried voice.

Typical of Gabe to pick up things like that even though he was half asleep. Could sniff emotions like a goddamn bloodhound.

*“Of course, yes, er. Nothing particular.”*

They hung up. The quietness had gone suffocatingly oppressive.
Outside, a car came to a halt. He leaped to the window, looked out. It was a taxi but it wasn't John.

He scrolled through his contact list, stopped at Mycroft's emergency number. The one he always would answer. Imagined calling him up, like he'd always go on about how he wanted Sherlock to do in situations like this.

Would get a lecture. *How could you be so stupid Sherlock?* and *What will you say to Gabriel?* and *Why do you always have to ruin things for yourself?* and-

He closed down the contact list.

Opened the browser.

Thirty seconds on Google, then a minute more to cross check to make sure he had the right name and number. So easy.

He sat for a while with his finger hovering above the screen. Yes or no?

An image of John, at home, making things up with Mary, kissing her, flashed through his mind. It made him feel like screaming, like running, like-

He pressed the number, heard the voice at the other end answer the call.

“Edward, hello, it's Shezza. I require your services.”
Chapter 15

John threw himself out of the car and ran up to the black door at Baker Street. He still had the key and didn't think twice about using it. He thought about Mrs. Hudson and tried to avoid making unnecessary noise as he took the 17 steps in six quick leaps.

The door to the flat was closed, he knocked, waited for two seconds and then used his key to let himself in there too.

The sitting room was still, silent, a heavy fog of cigarette smoke lingered in the darkness.

“Sherlock?” he half whispered, and then, when there was no reply, said it louder once more.

“Sherlock, are you there?” No reply.

The uncomfortable feeling in his stomach was quickly escalating into fear.

*Where the hell was he?*

He rushed into Sherlock's bedroom, found it empty, the bed unmade, the curtains drawn. Just last night, John had been lying here, flush to Sherlock's practically naked body. Their arms and legs had been all tangled up together in a perfect fit, the room steeped in a fuzzy warmth. Now, it was like a different place, abandoned and cold, and John's throat felt tight.

He checked the bathroom, then jogged up to the second bedroom. His room. It didn't look like anyone had been there for a long time, he noticed a thick layer of dust on the drawer.

The bed was stripped down to the mattress, a duvet and some pillows neatly stacked at the foot of the bed. Oh dear god. Where had he gone, what had he done?

*How the hell could I let this happen!*

Exasperated, he walked down to the sitting room again, took a moment to consider the next step. He intensely wished he had his phone.

As John gazed over the room, he began to notice it looked different somehow. Not the way it had been last night.

The desk had been cleared of the stacks of papers that had been there. Had Sherlock been tidying up? But then John's eyes fell on the documents, scattered below the desk, all over the floor. The sight made him quite uneasy.

He noticed the ashtray on the sofa table, brimming. Slowly, it began to dawn on John just how gruesome this evening must have been for Sherlock. How he had waited for John to show up, and at some point probably decided he wasn't going to. Thought John had let him down. *Oh Christ.*

*Where is he now?* The image of Sherlock on a dirty old mattress in that tenement building came up in his mind. He felt his stomach turning over in fear.

John went down the stairs and up to the door to Mrs. Hudson's flat. Light was radiating through the cracks. Maybe she was awake, but if not, it couldn't be helped. He knocked.

“Mrs. Hudson? It's John,” he called, fairly loud to make sure she would hear it was him.

He heard steps approaching. Mrs. Hudson opened the door, wrapped in a purple dressing gown,
looking ten years older than usual. John immediately knew something was very, very wrong.

“John. Oh John. Did Mycroft call you?”

“What, no. What has happened to Sherlock?”

And once again, John felt himself go into that strange, emotionally disconnected mode. His pulse normalized, so did his breathing. It was almost like he was removed from himself, watching from the outside.

“Oh dear,” she said. “You should probably talk to Mycroft then, I don't know what I'm allowed to-”

“No,” he interrupted. “It's me. I need to know. What happened?”

She sighed, stepped away from the door.

“Come on in, John.”

He was too restless to sit down, so he simply got inside and then waited, stood in parade rest with his hands interlocked behind his straightened back, prepared for anything.

“To be honest,” she began, “I don't know exactly what happened tonight. I had dozed off in front of the telly, and all of a sudden, I wake up to Sherlock throwing an absolute fit upstairs. I went up, but you know – it was just too much for me to handle...”

Her voice trickled off.

“Drugs, John. It was awful to see.”

“I had to contact his brother. I know Sherlock will be so angry with me but it was the only thing I could think of! I would have phoned that nice young man of his, but I don't have his number.”

She looked pleadingly at John, as if he was about to scold her for that.

“Of course,” he managed to get out. “You did the only right thing. But, what then, where did they go?”

“Oh, I don't know. To the hospital probably.” She was wringing her hands. “I've never seen him like that before, you know. He was...”

She looked down to the carpet, looked up at him again.

“It was bad, John,” she whispered, shaking her head. ”Really, really bad.”

“Can I borrow your phone,” John said, not so much a question as a command.

When he got it from her, he quickly found Mycroft at the top of the list of recently dialed numbers. The call went to voice mail.

“Mycroft, this is John Watson. I don't have a phone at the moment, I'm in the flat at Baker Street. Please contact me as soon as possible, I need to know how he's doing and if there's anything I can do. Call me at this number, or on my usual one after 10 o'clock in the morning. Thanks.”

To not know where Sherlock was, or how he was doing, and not be able to reach him – it made John feel almost physically sick to his stomach. His entire body told him to act, to move. But there was nothing for him to do and nowhere for him to go. Oh Sherlock.
Every imaginable catastrophic scenario had already crossed his mind by now. He tried to take some comfort in the fact that Mycroft had him, and that at least, he was not out on the streets, alone in an alley somewhere.

Waves of guilt came crashing down, made it difficult to breathe. He should have pushed Mary harder for her phone, he thought. Or he could have taken his laptop and sent Sherlock an email, if he'd only had the presence of mind to think of it. And how could he have been so stupid to think the talk with Mary would be so quickly over with, made promises he couldn't keep.

John closed his eyes in agony. He had made an inexcusable mistake and now Sherlock was paying the price.

John turned to Mrs. Hudson, who was watching him from the hallway.

“I'm going upstairs to wait there. Do you mind if I keep your phone until the morning?”

Back in the flat, he didn't really know what to do. The worry made him restless, and although he was beginning to feel how tired he was, he just couldn't allow himself to relax. He walked up to the window, opened it wide to let the chilly nighttime air replace the cigarette smoke inside.

Systematically, he began to pick up the papers from the floor, put them back in neat stacks on the desk.

He let his fingertip trace Sherlock's handwriting, scattered across the margins of research papers and scientific articles. There were the usual underlinings and circles; the angry question marks and interested exclamation points and the occasional 'Idiot!' scribbled in gigantic letters over an entire page.

Brilliant, beautiful Sherlock. The only one in the world.

He emptied the ashtray in the kitchen trash, and while he was there, washed up the cups and glasses in the sink, dried them and carefully placed them on their respective place in the cupboard.

All the while, there was only one single thing on his mind, and that was Sherlock.

At some point, morning light was beginning to turn the black sky outside into a dark blue. He tried to get a hold of Mycroft again, to no avail.

As the adrenaline rush wore off, John couldn't fight the sleep deprivation any longer. With Mrs. Hudson's phone in hand, he slowly shuffled into Sherlock's bedroom, crawled under the duvet. The sheets smelled of Sherlock and of him; it was their scents mingled together.

He felt like crying but was too tired to actually do so. The second he closed his eyes, he was falling backwards, tumbling into a dreamless state of unconsciousness.

John woke up and immediately remembered where he was, and why. He grabbed the phone; nothing. No texts, no missed calls. It was 9 o'clock in the morning.

He dialed Mycroft's number, two signals went through but then, voice mail again. John fought an impulse to chuck the phone into the wall. Then, fear came back to eat him up again.

He tried to block the thought, but couldn't do it fully. What had happened during the night? Mrs. Hudson had said it was really bad. What if the doctors hadn't been able to- NO!
He violently tried to push these thoughts out of his head. Of course Sherlock was alright! Or at least, was going to be! He was going to be alright and then he would come home, and this time, John would never let him down again.

If – no! when! - Sherlock would come home, John would make sure he never even had a reason to turn to drugs again. He would do anything, he realized. Anything!

Once more, John found himself pleading with the universe, in the same way he had done after Sherlock's suicide. That had turned out to not be a suicide. Short version: Not dead.

A miracle, it was. He had been given a second chance, back then. But what had he made of it? Pushed Sherlock away, in his self righteous anger. Gotten married. Made Sherlock watch the entire spectacle, participate even, as his best man.

Had it been revenge? John suddenly wondered. Some sort of subconscious way of getting back at Sherlock. Here, take this! Your turn to watch me die in front of your eyes!

And all throughout, Sherlock had supported him. Last night, Sherlock had hinted at having had feelings for John for a long time. And even so, he had encouraged him, facilitated the marriage. Why, John wondered now.

There was not enough air in the room, he couldn't stay still. He went into the bathroom, splashed some water in his face, watched his tired, unshaven reflexion in the mirror.

'I prefer my doctors clean shaven.' In a passing memory from what felt like ages ago, he could hear Sherlock's smiling baritone voice.

John was overcome with a sense of loss so strong it made him sink to the floor, bury his face in his hands.

This is all my fault, he thought, for the hundredth time since he got to Baker Street.

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Five minutes after the store had finally opened, John was holding in his hand a new phone with his old number.

He dialed Mycroft's emergency number, got voice mail. So much for his bloody talk about always picking up, John thought angrily.

Just as he had decided to start going around to the nearby hospitals, his phone chimed with a text alert. Mycroft!

'John, thank you for your concern. S is under excellent medical care and is expected to be released from the hospital later this afternoon. He will not be at Baker St for some time. Do not contact him. Please respect our strong wish on this matter. Thank you. MH'

John exhaled in relief, felt his knees get weak and shaky, tears filling his eyes. He re-read the text many times, just to make sure that it really said that Sherlock was in good enough shape to actually leave later today. Thank you dear God!

Only after a while did he start to think more about the part of not contacting Sherlock. What the hell was that about? His hands were trembling to the point where he could barely use them. It took several attempts to write the new message.
Thank you for letting me know he's alright! But what do you mean? Do you mean today? I need to see him! Where is he?'

The reply was instant.

'Meet me at 19:00 at Speedy's.'

John sighed, and reluctantly accepted he would have to wait until later. At least now he knew Sherlock was going to be okay, and that was all that really mattered at this point.

'Alright,' he wrote back.

After a minute of just standing outside the electronics store, he got the phone back out of his pocket. He desperately wanted to contact Sherlock. Just something, anything. A brief message to let him know that he was thinking about him, wanted to be there for him.

John started to type, but stopped mid-way. Mycroft had been very clear in his request. Maybe Sherlock needed to rest, needed a break from the drama. John reluctantly put his phone away again. He would do the right thing and wait.

Walking to Baker Street, John called in sick to work. He got two cups of coffee and some muffins to go, and then made his way back to give Mrs. Hudson the update.

Two hours later, he fell asleep again, on the brown leather sofa. Even though it was a fitful, shallow sleep this time, there was still a great comfort in being home.

Sherlock was going to be alright. They both were.
Chapter 16

After a brisk walk through Regent’s Park to work off some restlessness, John was sitting at a table in the small sandwich bar. He anxiously awaited getting the full story of exactly what had happened last night and how Sherlock was doing now.

Precisely on time, the black town car rolled up and the familiar figure of Mycroft Holmes stepped out. They exchanged a brief handshake.

As always, Mycroft was impeccably dressed in a tailored suit and shiny black shoes, but he looked unusually worn, with dark circles under his eyes. The man had probably been awake all through the night.

John couldn't wait another second.

“How is he?” he asked before Mycroft had even sat down.

“Well, John,” he began. “As I'm sure you, as a doctor, can appreciate, the answer to that question is a very relative one. But, given the circumstances, I'd have to say he's surprisingly okay.”

“Where is he now?”

“Oh, where he always ends up after disasters like this – back home with Mummy. Probably already wrapped in blankets in front of the fire place and being force fed pudding. And tomorrow I'm sure Daddy will make him listen for hours on end to his latest plans for the kitchen garden. A fair punishment, I must say. An eye for an eye, and all that.”

“What happened last night?” John asked impatiently, and was met with an ice cold stare.

“I would expect you to be able to figure that out by yourself, John. After all, you were the trigger for this mess. You and your extraordinary selfish behavior.”

Mycroft's expression was stern.

“I would have expected better from you, John, really I would’ve.”

John threw his hands out in a pleading gesture.

“Mycroft, wait.” He struggled for the right words. “I don't know how much you know, but surely you're aware of how much I care about Sherlock. There were a lot of things I couldn't control last night, but you must know I would never do anything to deliberately harm him!”

“Of course you wouldn't, but that's beside the point now, isn't it? The end result is what matters.”

“Yes, but-” John tried to break in.

“And the end result, in this case, John, very nearly cost my brother his life last night.”

John felt his stomach twist upon hearing those words.

Mycroft locked his eyes on John.

“If Mrs. Hudson hadn't been home, I think we would have seen a very different outcome. And that frankly makes me terrified to think about. Surely you understand I need to do everything in my
power to prevent a situation like this to occur again.”

“Of course, and so do I!” John said with a hint of desperation in his voice. “The circumstances of last night were extreme, and I promise you, nothing like that will ever happen again! You have my word!”

Mycroft rolled his eyes.

“Young word,” he scoffed. “You say things last night were beyond your control, John. So pray tell, what makes you think they’ll always be controllable in the future?”

“Listen,” John said. “I made a terrible mistake in marrying Mary, and I’ll admit I’ve been more than a little blind. But for your information, I have taken a lot of steps along the way to correct that now. Last night is not representative of how things will be.”

Mycroft tipped his head up, looked to the roof for a few seconds in an exaggerated gesture.

“Tell me John,” he said. “How old is your daughter now?”

“Three months, but that—”

“Three months old.” Mycroft interrupted. “And how well would you say you know your wife?”

“She has actually told me a lot about her past now, so I’d say I know her fairly well. Look Mycroft, the only thing that matters—”

“Stop it, John,” Mycroft said, sounding quite angry. “You need to face reality here! You have responsibilities towards that little girl that you have brought into this world, and you have on your hands a wife with a record of being absolutely ruthless. Even if you were to proceed with this, eh, divorce,” Mycroft seemed disgusted with taking the word into his mouth, “you can’t possibly expect it to go down smoothly!”

“And into this mess – a mess into which you have walked completely voluntarily, I might add – into this you want to drag my brother! Of all people. The last man on earth equipped for that!”

Mycroft was staring him down. John tried his best not to avert his eyes. He felt he was being thoroughly manipulated, and even though he didn't agree with Mycroft, it was getting harder by the second to find valid arguments to counter with. He had expected Mycroft to be perhaps a bit angry, but was completely unprepared for this.

“Haven’t you figured it out by now, John! Sherlock is simply not cut out to handle this kind of drama. We are talking about an individual who emotionally is level with your average twelve-year old! Fortunately, he has the intellectual capacities to recognize this about himself – why do you reckon it took five years before you saw him in any type of relationship? He knows his vulnerabilities.”

Mycroft shook his head in exasperation.

“Add to that, his long standing pattern of self destructive behaviour. Heroin AND cocaine, John, in amounts enough to kill a person less tolerant! THAT was what happened last night. If you keep this up, you may very well turn out to be the ruin of Sherlock. Do you want that on your conscience?”

“Mycroft, I—” John searched for words and for courage, fought the goddamn tears that were burning in his eyes.
“I love Sherlock. Okay? I love him. And I hear what you're saying, and I understand your concern for your brother, but you just can't ask me to step aside! I have made a lot of mistakes, but I intend to fix them or die trying.”

“Please John, spare me the melodrama. You 'love' him, you say? Well, perhaps our definitions of that concept differ slightly.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” John said angrily.

“Have you at all reflected upon the sacrifices Sherlock made for you? Let's start with his exile, because that certainly merits some consideration.”

John waited silently for what was to come.

“After Sherlock had to fake his death, I think it's safe to say that almost everything he did, he did to keep you safe. On the few occasions that we were in contact during those two years, his first enquiry would always, without fail, be about you.”

Mycroft seemed to disappear into his thoughts for a little while.

“You know, John, sometimes I blame myself. I should have done more to prepare him for real life, not help him escape the way he always did into his books and daydreams…” Mycroft stirred sugar into the cup of milky tea in front of him.

"I used to read to him at night, when Mummy and Daddy were away. Pirates and knights, that sort of thing, it was all he wanted to hear. And it’s a shame, really, because in those stories, you know, when the brave knight would return after having been to hell and back to kill the dragon - the princess would always be there, faithfully waiting. Not once do I recall her having gone off and married someone else!”

Mycroft sighed deeply.

“Oh, Christ, John. I tried to make him understand, but he just didn’t. Expected you to be there still, at Baker Street. My poor, naive little brother.”

"I don’t know what to say, Mycroft,” John sighed. ”You, or Sherlock, or anyone else for that matter, could have told me! I tried to survive, that was what I did. How the hell could I have known he wasn’t dead!”

"No, of course, John, you couldn’t have. I’m merely trying to help you understand a little bit more about Sherlock and the way his mind works regarding these things. Alright, so, we were talking about 'love’. Leads me seamlessly into the topic of your wedding.”

“What about it? As I said, it was a big mistake, but I didn't realize it at that time. Perhaps you are immune to making mistakes, Mycroft, but most of us ordinary humans aren't, you know. That doesn't make someone a horrible person, or mean that one can't try to repair it.”

“That is not what I'm referring to. John, allow me to be blunt. To my brother, you were the sun in his universe. For five bloody years, you were all he ever talked about. The only one he would listen to. When you walked into a room, you were all he would see. And yet! Who was it that gracefully accepted to be the best man at your wedding? Who stood by you in every step of the way towards your marriage to Mary? Who even took a man’s life to keep you and Mary safe? My brother, the dragon slayer.”

John felt nauseated, he couldn’t speak. Deep inside him, Mycroft’s words unfortunately rang all too
true.

"You say that you love Sherlock, but look at your recent actions! He was in a bad state after you got married. You weren’t there to see it, but I was. And I was more worried for him than I’ve been in many years. But then, completely unexpectedly, Gabriel showed up again. And suddenly, things got better."

John winced at the mention of that bloke’s name. He had tried very hard not to think about him, tried to just brush it off by telling himself Sherlock would take care of it.

"These last few months, John, Sherlock has really been so… content, I guess would be the correct word. Maybe even happy. Lots of solved cases and very little drama. And then you come barging in again, and in the course of a few days, everything is worse than it’s been in ten bloody years! Are you beginning to understand what I’m saying here, John?"

John did not like where this conversation -or rather, monologue- was going. Not one bit. And the worst part was that he was running out of arguments. He felt like he was falling.

There was only one thing left to say that he could think of.

"I love him! You don’t understand the connection we have. And while I sympathize with your worry, this really has to be up to Sherlock to decide, not you."

"John, please," said Mycroft, now with a more genuine tone back in his voice. “Don’t be stupid. I am here because Sherlock asked me to.”

John was falling faster now, tumbling, spinning.

"I can’t believe that, Mycroft, I’m sorry. I know Sherlock feels the same about me."

Mycroft looked very angry again.

"My patience with you is running out, Dr. Watson. For the final time, try to get what I’m saying. Sherlock could have died last night! So he and I both agree that at this point, we need to prioritize his safety over everything else. This is not a bloody romance novella!"

The way Mycroft was looking at John sent icy chills down his spine.

"John, you have proved to be a liability. Three times now, in one way or another, you seem to have been the trigger for his use. I don’t know if Sherlock would survive a forth. And I’m sure as hell not going to wait to find out."

The stale taste of blood and metal in John’s mouth. It was the taste of defeat.

"What do you want me to do?" he whispered, head all dizzy. He wondered if he was going to actually faint.

"Nothing. That’s what I want you to do. Just leave Sherlock alone. If you care about him at all, John, that is what you have to do. Give him a chance to get back on his feet. A shot at repairing the damage you caused to the first functional relationship he’s ever had. Not that I think it will work,” he added mumblingly.

"What?" John asked through his haze.

"Well, my dear brother, for all his excellence in the art of lying, apparently felt that this was the
right moment to start being Mr. Honesty. Whilst high, he called his boyfriend up and told him everything. I managed to persuade the man to fly back to London anyway, but from what I gather, I very much doubt that it can be fixed this time.”

Mycrof sighed, a deep, sad exhale.

John was still sitting down as Mycroft eventually stood up, collected his things. A strange sense of emptiness protected him from the full impact of the desperation and despair lurking just beneath the surface.

"John," Mycroft said hesitatingly. John kept his gaze straight into the wall, did not care to muster the energy to look up at him.

"I am sorry about this, I truly am. I always liked you, you’re a good man. Under different circumstances… well. Take care of yourself, John."

In his peripheral vision, John saw him taking two steps towards the door, then stop. He came back.

"I almost forgot. I wanted to give you this, should you need an extra bit of… understanding. Do be so kind to burn it when you’ve read it."

Unceremoniously, Mycroft dropped a thin, brown envelope on the table in front of John. He immediately recognized the hospital logo, thought that it most likely was Sherlock’s medical records. John looked up at him.

"Please tell Sherlock I never meant to let him down," he said quietly.

Mycroft did not reply, but he nodded once and gave him a firm pat on his good shoulder.

"Goodbye, John Watson."
Chapter 17

A FEW HOURS EARLIER

Bright light. Everywhere, he was surrounded by this bloody bright light. It was burning his retinas, even though his eyes were closed.

_Am I dead?_ he wondered, feeling a jolt of panic at the possibility.

_I don’t want to be dead!_ The strength of that thought actually surprised him a bit.

Beeping from a monitor. He forced his eyes open just enough to made out the numbers on the screen. Blood pressure acceptable. Normal sinus rhythm. Oxygen saturation excellent at 99%.

Not dead, then.

Good.

His head hurt, badly. Everything did. It tasted like something had died in his mouth. Dead. Deaded.

_Why am I here?_ He tried to remember.

The memories hit him like a brick falling from the sky.

John. He didn’t come. A memory from last night flashed before him. Of sitting around, waiting for John to show up. _Oh John._

But wait. Another image from the night. Elusive. He tried to focus. It was from a hospital room. Not this one. Two chairs and an examining table. Lots of people there, talking in stern voices to him. ’You need to calm down, Mr. Holmes,’ someone had shouted. But there was something else in this memory, he felt certain. Something about John.

Stupid mind! Focus!

Ah. There. Now he could see it. It had been his phone. He had still had his phone. And in the midst of the tumult in the examination room, he had taken it out. Yes. He felt almost certain. There had been a text from Mary.

Wait. No.

He had thought it was from Mary. But really, it had been from John.

John was going to come, after all!

He had not let him down. That knowledge was equal parts good and bad. Good, of course! But also bad, because of how he’d messed it up.

Oh, John. If only he had gotten there just a few hours earlier. Fuck.

But he hadn’t gotten there earlier. And he hadn’t, in fact, reached out to him to ease the wait, either. Had been caught up in his own business. And Sherlock had done what he did and that was all there was to it.

It could all have ended last night. Ended right there, alone in a dark flat at Baker Street. Game over
for Sherlock Holmes. He shuddered.

He had known. Somewhere deep down, he had known something like this would happen. *I find it difficult, this sort of thing.*

Oh. So so very very tired.

**************************

There were people talking in his room. One was definitely Mycroft. Who were the other two? They kept their voices down, he tried to make out what they were saying.

"He’s lucky to have you," one of the unfamiliar voices said. "But things like these are difficult for the family, as well. You should really try to get yourself some rest, Sir. He’s out of danger now."

"I agree. He’s pulled through remarkably well. Your brother is going to be alright, this time too," the other unidentified voice said.

And then there were some shuffling about, a cupboard opening and closing, and he could hear someone adjusting something with his IV-bag. Then the steps disappeared and the door closed.

Mycroft’s steps across the room, the heavy thud as he sat down in the armchair in the corner.

Sherlock kept his eyes closed, pretended to sleep. Planned to sleep, in fact. Tried to doze off again.

Wait. What was that?

Sniffling sounds. Muffled.

Sherlock got absolutely ice cold. Shivery slivers of anxiety ran through him. Frozen, in a panicky sort of way. He realized his brother was crying.

He never imagined Mycroft could cry. Hadn’t ever considered the possibility. Ridiculous! His brother was made of steel, was far above mushy sentiment. Which just made this so much more horrible.

For me, Sherlock thought. He cries for me.

He couldn’t show Mycroft he was awake, because he knew that would humiliate Mycroft more than anything. He’d never get over it.

Christ. It was pure agony, lying there listening to this emotional outburst.

Then, another memory hit him. It was vague snippets of the doubtlessly incoherent conversation with Gabe over the phone. Oh. He winced. Oh. No!

He squeezed his eyes, hard. Tried to clear the memory out of his mind.

*Why do I hurt the ones who care the most about me?*

*I want to be better! Yes! Be better!*

Don’t want to end up like this again.
Don’t want to die.
Don’t want to be the reason good people cry.
But how? When you don’t even know where to begin?

A completely novel concept began to take form in his mind.

Yes. It could be an experiment. But no way of controlling the variables, so, more of a single case study, then. It would have to do. Could still make a spreadsheet of it.

For one month, I will follow the advice of every one I trust.

Yes. Made sense. Sherlock felt a little bit uplifted, even, by this crazy idea. He would yield himself completely. For once in his life, he would do exactly as people told him to. Maybe they would know things about life that he so obviously didn’t.

Who do I trust? He made a mental list.

John, was the first name that came up. Oh, John. Every time he though about him, it physically hurt.

He would do this for John, too, he thought. Become a better person, for John.

The list. Mycroft. Mummy, maybe. Lestrade? Yes. Molly, hm, yes. Anyone else? He considered. This would have to do.

********************

He was sitting up in his bed. He’d had two glasses of apple juice and some biscuits.

The chief physician standing at the edge of his bed was a woman in her early sixties. Her gray hair was elegantly styled, and her eyebrows perfectly shaped and filled in with a pencil. She held herself with a ballerina’s grace.

She had a no-nonsense air about her, and was making a quite intelligent impression as she spoke to him. Sherlock decided that he’d put her on the list, too.

”Mr. Holmes,” she said. ”I hope you realize how very lucky you were last night. Most people would not have survived.”

Terrible chills from those words. He thought again that he really, really wanted to live.

”As part of our discharge routines, we always offer a meeting with our psychologist, Dr. Riyat. This is of course completely voluntarily, but I would strongly recommend you to consider it.”

Sherlock hated therapists. Hated them. Despised them. He had seen so many different ones, all throughout his childhood, and then his teens, and then in his twenties. Idiots, all of them. But now, he remembered his new approach.

”Fine,” he reluctantly said. ”I’ll see her.”

”Him,” she corrected. ”His name is Doctor Kumar Riyat. He’s been with us for three years now, and he’s very good at what he does.”

Sherlock did not buy this for one second, but kept his mouth shut. Become better. For John. For Mycroft. For Gabe. For everyone.

********************
He had been allowed to shower, unsupervised, and had put on the clothes that Mycroft’s minions had been out buying for him.

"Soft!" he had ordered Mycroft. "They need to be soft!"

So now, he was sitting dressed in a pair of blue jogging bottoms, the kind with the fuzzy inside; a cotton undershirt of exceptional quality and a gray jumper in one hundred percent cashmere, staring blankly at the person called Dr. Riyat.

A big beard, brownish black, covered most of his face. It was hard to stop looking at it. And despite the beard, Dr. Riyat did not look a day older than twenty. Of course. Without the beard he would look even younger.

He was of average height and weight, olive skinned, with short hair. He had thick framed glasses and was wearing jeans, trainers and a hooded sweatshirt, with a print on the front depicting a set of DJ-type earphones. Indian decent, upper middle class background, oldest of three siblings, parents still married.

Likes comic books and drinks ecological beer. Most recent holiday was a weekend trip to Brooklyn, New York. Writes poetry and goes to obscure music festivals with his friends. Lives with a girlfriend in a boring suburban apartment building-

Sherlock was interrupted in his deductions.

"Is there anything you’d like to ask me, before I get started on some questions for you?" Dr. Riyat said.

"How old are you? I didn’t know they employed children at this place,” said Sherlock. This was a waste of time.

Dr. Riyat met his grumpiness with a good natured smile.

"Looking young is a cross I have to bear, I’m afraid. I’m thirty-two.”

"Still young,” said Sherlock. It had been a mistake to come here. Best to go now.

"You’ll have to excuse me, Doctor, but I really don’t see how you could help me,” he scoffed, then got out of his chair to leave.

"Fine, whatever,” said the young man."You seem to be doing such a spectacular job at helping yourself, so, by all means, leave.”

Sherlock stopped.

"You’ve got some nerve. I could tell you everything about you, even the things you don’t know yourself! Whereas you really don’t have a single clue about me.”

"How do you know I don’t?”

"Because I can tell you’re an idiot. No offense, most therapists are. I know everything you’re going to say. I’ve been through it before.”

"Then what’s the harm in risking hearing it again? They won’t discharge you for another two hours. Do you have something more important to do perhaps? Watch some more of that stimulating daytime television in your comfy observation room?”
Sherlock debated with himself, then reluctantly sat down again.

"Shoot," he said with a smirk.

The young man leaned forward in his chair, notepad in his lap. He seemed to be studying Sherlock’s face. Sherlock squirmed internally.

"I know from the media that you have a remarkable intellect," he said. "That you’ve turned observation into an art. 'The science of deduction', right?"

"Brilliant; simply brilliant. I see I’ve met my match in you."

The therapist ignored the slur.

"What you seem to really suck at, though, is regulating your emotions," Dr. Riyat said, matter-of-factly.

Sherlock was taken aback by the wording, as well as the blunt statement of the fact he knew to be true.

"Well, since I did come here on account of a drug overdose, that was hardly too difficult to figure out," he threw back.

"You hide behind a cool facade of rationality. But I think you struggle with how to cope when your emotions overpower your logic. I also think you are very lonely. Not because you don’t have people who care about you, I’m certain you do, but because you don’t know how to relate to them. You never learned."

Sherlock was quiet now. He did not know what to say.

"Mr. Holmes, dealing with emotions and relationships with other people, you know. Those are things that can be learned. Practiced. We don’t all come into this world knowing intuitively what to do. In fact, most people don’t. This is the type of thing I work with. I help people learn new skills."

"I don’t need any new skills," Sherlock protested unconvincingly.

"Alright. So the drugs are working out well for you, then?"

Maybe it was the fact that Sherlock still wasn’t back to his normal capabilities, after the previous night. But suddenly he thought that this young, bearded, trainer-wearing person perhaps wasn’t so bad after all.

"No," he replied quietly. "They are not."

Dr. Riyat nodded.

"What triggered it last night? I saw in your records that you haven’t used in a long time."

What the hell, Sherlock thought.

"There was a person. Someone I had high hopes regarding. Regarding, er, us."

He was silent, gathered courage to continue. Dr. Riyat was waiting without saying a word. Sherlock wondered for how long he could be quiet before the therapist would eventually speak. He decided not to test it.
"And I was waiting for them to show up, but they didn’t. And then I thought they were never going
to.”

He sighed.

"There’s a marriage involved.”

"I see,” said Dr. Riyat.

"And a baby.”

"I see,” he said again, looking completely neutral to this information.

It actually felt kind of good, Sherlock thought, to be allowed to say these things to someone. Especially to someone who, at least the way it seemed now, weren't going to start judging or lecturing him.

"It overwhelmed you,” the therapist said, as a statement and not a question. "The pain you felt when you thought you’d been rejected by this person that you love.”

Sherlock felt tears coming into his eyes. It was strange, hearing someone who didn’t know him put into words exactly what he had been feeling. He suddenly thought he really liked Dr. Riyat.

However, he did not think he could stand getting all upset at this moment. He forced his emotions under control again. Maybe he could even ask this person for advice.

Sherlock never asked anyone for advice. He wondered if he’d ever asked John? He certainly could have. Certainly had gotten it without asking, on many occasions. John always knew the right things to do.

"But now I’ve found out that this person was actually going to come.”

"Have you talked to them?"

Sherlock shook his head.

"I’m,” he hesitated at the admission he was about to do, "afraid.”

He was surprised to notice that it was true. He had actually managed to put the correct label on the crazy, stomach twisting emotion that was whirling around inside of him at the moment. Normally it would all be a mixed up, undefinable mess.

Hm. Most unusual.

"What is it that you are afraid of?” prompted Dr. Riyat, rousing Sherlock from his thoughts.

"I am very frightened that I will end up here again, or maybe-” his voice trailed off. ”Or maybe at the morgue.”

Dr. Riyat leaned forward a bit in his chair.

"You seem to have very strong feelings for this person. And last night, that triggered you to do something that could have resulted in your death. So of course you’re going to feel frightened. That actually sounds like a very healthy response,” Dr. Riyat carefully put forward.

Sherlock was listening intensely now.
"And it sounds to me," Dr. Riyat continued, "like you don’t trust yourself to be able to survive another disappointment, yeah?"

Sherlock was absolutely still for a long moment.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Have they made you feel let down or disappointed in the past, too?"

Dr. Riyat was talking so gently, but still so neutral. No obvious display of emotion. Sherlock really appreciated that.

"Yes," he whispered again.

"Would you like to take a moment to brainstorm ways that you could perhaps deal with this dilemma? Try to see if we can figure out some acceptable solution to keep you safe, for the time being, at least?"

Sherlock didn’t have to think for long about this.

"Yes," he said.
When John returned to the flat, he sat down and immediately ripped open the brown envelope that Mycroft had given him. He took out the papers and saw that it indeed was a medical record. *Sherlock’s.*

He did not want to read this. Really, really did not want to see, but what choice did he have? And it was not as if things could get much worse at this point, anyway. Might as well read the damn papers and find out exactly how last night had unfolded for Sherlock.

He thought he had been prepared, but when his eyes landed on Sherlock’s name, John thought he was going to be sick to his stomach.

His eyes darted over the papers as he was trying to take it in all at once.

The first thing that John noticed was the ICD codes for the two diagnoses. As Mycroft already had told him, they were for poisoning by cocaine as well as heroin.

But to see it in print, right below Sherlock’s full name and date of birth, was surreal. He kept on reading.

*Oriented to place but not to time or person. Severely agitated and displays paranoid and grandiose ideations-*

Oh Sherlock.

He skimmed through the words, picking up the most significant parts.

*Patient arrives non-voluntarily with brother and 2 private security officers. Brother has been alerted earlier this night by the patient’s landlady, after she found patient in a manic state in his flat-*

A manic state, John thought. Oh shit, this was indeed bad.

*Patient has been drug free for the last 10 years, with the exception of one relapse into heroin abuse in the autumn of last year, brother states. Brother thinks that was triggered by the separation from a previous live-in partner-*

Previous live-in partner. He realized that must mean him. John wanted to stop reading, but couldn’t allow himself to.

*Patient is severely agitated, refuses to sit down and talks incoherently and incessantly, in English as well as a few other languages. States that he has an ”international reputation” and threatens staff with ”grave consequences”. Shouts and curses at attending physician and other members of the staff-*

Oh dear God. It just kept getting worse.

*Attempts to throw a chair out of the window and proceeds to challenge the attending physician to a fencing duel-*

Of course, John thought. What else.

*The patient states that his brother ”is the British Government” and believes to be the victim of a*
And then, this,

*Patient talks repeatedly about a Catch 22, and explains this by saying "the only one who can save me is Doctor John Watson but he is dead." (Note: No Doctor Watson currently employed at this hospital.)*

John closed his eyes in agony. I’m so sorry I couldn’t save you, he thought. I’m so terribly sorry.

*Patient still uncooperative, refuses treatment- Administered diazepam intramuscularly-*

Alright, John thought. They gave him a sedative. It was the right thing to do.

Then, finally,

*Responds well to the medication- Is markedly calmer-*

The note from this morning,

*Patient has responded very well to the night’s treatment- Fully oriented to person, time, place- All vital signs normalized-*

And at the end,

*Brother has arranged for continued monitoring and treatment-*

When John was done reading through the papers, he remained seated at the kitchen table for a long time, questioning himself. How could he not have seen the extent of Sherlock’s vulnerability?

***************

One last night, that was what John had decided. He would spend one last night at Baker Street.

And then, in the morning, he would put one foot in front of the other, again and again, and do all the things he deemed necessary. After that, who knew what would await him down the road. He didn’t particularly care.

He hadn’t had any emotional outburst, hadn’t cried, no, nothing like that. It was just that pervasive, empty feeling.

It was late at night now, and he was walking around in the sitting room, taking in and memorizing every little detail.

He let his fingertips touch the skull, brushed off some dust from it. He realized Sherlock would probably notice.

'Dust is an essential part of my filing system!’ he had once yelled at poor Mrs. Hudson when she had been kind enough to tidy up the flat.

So many memories.
Close to midnight, John walked into the bathroom and got himself ready for the night. He thought of the many times he had been in there with Sherlock, attending to the injury of the day. Sherlock, always the reckless one.

And standing there, it dawned on John how true that was. Sherlock was indeed reckless with himself, in many different ways. John had given intense consideration to all the things that Mycroft had said, and now, it all sort of came together.

Sherlock had done so many things for John, at the expense of his own wellbeing. If John had only understood. He did now, at least he thought he did.

With that, his mind was made up. He would return the favor. He would protect Sherlock by not pushing him, by not standing in his way. He would NOT be the cause of any more distress for Sherlock, even if that meant never seeing him again. So help me God.

But then there was that little sliver of doubt. He couldn’t let it go. No, no matter how hard he tried, John couldn’t make this sacrifice without being absolutely certain.

And although that meant breaking his promise to Mycroft, and perhaps upsetting Sherlock again, well, he had to take that risk, just this once.

It was ten past twelve at night. John picked up his phone from where he had placed it on the bedside table.

So hard to know what to say.

At twelve thirty, he sent the text to the number he knew by heart.

He had wanted to say so much more. I love you, in particular. And I miss you like crazy, please let me come see you. And You’re my everything, I promise to take better care of you. And I can’t live without you.

But he didn’t. No, he was very careful not to write anything that would be too emotionally charged. But later, much later, when this night was nothing but a memory, and he was lying awake in a different bed, in a different flat, John would wonder if maybe he should have. Wonder how things would have turned out if he had.

What he wrote was this.

'Sherlock. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for everything that happened. I hope you are feeling better. Have talked to Mycroft. I want to do whatever is best for you. Please let me know what that is. John.'

John was back in Sherlock’s bed, waiting with the phone in his hand. There was no reply.

Eventually, he dozed off. At one o’clock, he was awakened by a vibration and a simultaneous chime.

'At this point, I believe it is best to do things the way my brother suggested. Please forgive me, John, for all the hurt that I have caused you. SH.'

It was dangerously close to being too much. John put his phone down on the table again, closed his eyes. He thought that he would probably never be able to sleep again, but somehow, eventually, he
was. There were no dreams and no nightmares.

In the early morning hours, John awoke. For a blissful few seconds, he did not remember, but when it all came back to him, it felt like a knife stab in the guts.

He got up, pushed the curtains aside, and made the bed with the precision that was deeply ingrained in him after the years in the army. On his way out of the room, his arm brushed against Sherlock’s robes that were hanging on a hook. He didn’t even try to fight the impulse, but simply grabbed the red one and tucked it under his arm. He’d take it with him.

For hours last night, after the text, John had been trying to formulate a letter to leave for Sherlock. But it had been really hard. No matter how he began, it would always end up the same way as the text he really had wanted to send - as a desperate plea for another chance, a frantic declaration of love.

To leave a letter like that, would be the complete opposite of what he had promised Mycroft to do, and worse, what he had sworn to himself to protect Sherlock from.

He gave up. There couldn’t be a long letter, because regardless of how he tried, it would turn into something that would be more about his own needs.

But he really needed to leave something.

Finally, he sat down at the desk, took out a white notecard. On it he wrote:

_Sherlock,

To the very best of times.
Please allow yourself to be happy. You deserve it.
I hope someday our paths will cross again.

Always yours,
John_

He put the note inside an envelope, and on it he wrote, Sherlock.

On a whim, he reached into his shirt, pulled out his army dog tags. He wore them every day, just because it felt like he’d forgotten something when he didn’t have them.

He slipped the chain with the tags into the envelope, then sealed it.

The violin case was on the desk. John opened it and placed the small envelope inside, then carefully shut the case and secured it with the hatch.

John made his way out of the flat and locked the door behind him. He stepped out into the bright sunshine, walked away without looking back.

The idea had presented itself yesterday, but John hadn’t made the final decision until this morning. Now that his mind was made up, he walked in a brisk pace for about thirty minutes, not allowing himself even a second’s hesitation. He knew that if he did, there would be no way for him to go through with it.
Eventually, he was standing in front of one of the towering, glass clad high-rises in The City. He lowered his shoulders, straightened his back, and went inside.

At the reception desk, he was greeted, if one could call it that, by a very beautiful and very snarky young woman. She looked him up and down, clearly judging his casual state of dress, and raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Is he expecting you, Mister…?"

"Holmes," John filled in. "Mycroft Holmes. Ask him to meet me in the lobby."

Confident that this should do the trick, John turned around and walked over to the minimalistic waiting area in the lobby. He kept his eyes straight on the elevators.

Soon enough, the doors opened and the man stepped out, sweeping his eyes across the space.

John took a small, and perhaps ever so slightly sadistic, pleasure in watching as the expression on Gabriel's face changed from close-bitten to shocked when he noticed John.

John stood in place and waited as Gabriel reluctantly approached him.

"Really?" said Gabriel, apparently going for his very best public school accent. The way he said it, it sounded more like 'rarely', but John knew better than to care.

*Posh fuck, you can't intimidate me*, he thought to himself.

"Hello to you, too," John said, trying to sound as indifferent as he could.

"What the fuck do you want?" Gabriel's face was full of contempt, but John was pretty certain there was a fair amount of fear there, as well.

"I have some things to discuss with you. I noticed there's a coffee shop just across the street. It will only take a minute." John looked him straight in the eye, waited.

"You do realize you are quite possibly the last person in London I would like to have coffee with?"

"Yeah well," John said sternly, "you're not exactly my dream date, either, so don't flatter yourself. I do however think you'll want to hear what I have to say. I suggest you come with me now before I change my mind."

Gabriel stood quiet for a second, then indicated with a nod towards the entrance.

"Let's go then."

They walked in a tense silence across the street and into the Starbuck's, which was thankfully uncrowded.

"What can I get you?" John asked as nicely as he could force himself to. Man, this was surreal.

When he had returned with the coffees to the bar desk, he spoke.

"Okay. I find it difficult, this sort of thing, so I'll go straight to the point and we can get this over with. I want you to know that the, er, thing that happened was entirely my fault. You shouldn't judge Sherlock too harshly for it, because it really was all me."

Gabriel looked taken aback.
"Why the hell are you telling me this?"

John silently wondered the exact same thing. He tried to refocus on his promise.

"Because I can’t stand the thought of him being alone and miserable."

"Then why don’t you go over there to provide some loving comfort, John? You seem to be quite the expert at that, from what I gather," Gabe said bitterly.

John’s every cell hurt at having to do this. He bit his teeth hard together, censored the stingy comeback he so badly wanted to retort with.

"He doesn’t want me to. That’s the only reason. Otherwise, rest assured there would be nothing in this world that could stop me." Oh fuck. The worst part of it all was that it was true.

Gabriel looked up in surprise, but he didn’t comment on what John had said. Instead he sighed.

“John. I appreciate the gesture, but I really don’t care to discuss this with you. It doesn’t even matter anymore. It was quite enough to come home to learn that Sherlock apparently is a heroin junkie!” He shook his head in disbelief.

“Look. The damage is done. It’s over,” he added quietly, his eyes turned down to the cup of coffee on the desk.

John took a moment to observe the man slumped down on the bar stool next to him. He was obviously hurting, too. Christ, what a mess.

He studied the bruise on Gabe’s cheek. It was quite remarkable, actually; yellow and blue and covering a large portion of his cheek and all the way up to his eye. In a twisted kind of way, John felt a little bit proud over having thrown such a perfect punch.

John made a vague gesture towards it.

"I’m sorry about, er, that,” he said awkwardly.

Gabriel shrugged.

"As it turns out, I deserved it,” he said. "I really had no clue! I mean, we used to party pretty hard in our twenties, but this-” he made a flailing gesture. "I had no idea he’d gotten into this sort of stuff."

Gabe tiredly rubbed his eyes with his hand.

"What happened with Sherlock is my fault. If I hadn’t, last Saturday, you know-” Gabe stopped talking, seemed to get lost in thoughts for a while.

"No, I don’t think that’s true,” said John. "He would have found a way regardless. If anyone’s to blame, it’s probably me. I went over there and I pushed him. I shouldn’t have."

"No you really shouldn’t have,” said Gabriel, anger flaring up in his eyes for a moment.

"Why, John? I mean, you lived with him for years, right, you must have had plenty of opportunities if you were so inclined. I always assumed you were together, that’s why I didn’t reach out to Sherlock earlier!”
"I used to read your blog, you know." He smiled, a weak smile. "Then suddenly you were getting married! I’ll admit that was quite a shocker."

The anger in his eyes returned again.

"But why now, though? I don’t get it! You’re married, right, and have a kid! You chose to move away! So why the fuck did you have to come back and ruin everything, just when it was starting to…! John, you have no idea of how much I’ve missed Sherlock, all these years. Can you imagine, what it’s like? To get another chance with someone you thought you had lost forever? Damn it, John, why!"

His words were burning inside of John, but not because of guilt. To get another chance… yes. He could indeed imagine this. Could picture it so intensely it made his heart ache.

"I honestly don’t know how to answer that," John said quietly. "I don’t really understand it myself." He looked at Gabe. "But I’m here now to tell you that I’m stepping away. I’ll stay away. You have my word. Just… just make sure Sherlock’s alright, yeah?"

"As I said. It’s over," said Gabriel with a sigh.

"So that’s it?" John asked. "You’re simply going to give up, just like that? Lay down flat right before the finish line? Goddamn it, I’m telling you - I would give anything to be in your shoes! Okay, so he made some mistakes, but like I said, that was, unfortunately, to a large extent triggered by me. And who the hell is perfect, right. If Sherlock means so much to you, then why give up now? Where’s your bloody fighting spirit?"

John couldn’t believe he was saying all this.

Gabe looked at him, seemed to consider.

"Yeah," he said eventually. "Maybe you’re right. I’ll think about it."

They both finished their coffee in silence. It wasn’t tense anymore, but John felt completely overtaken by sadness. He tried to not let it show.

"How did you even find out about this?" asked Gabriel. "How did you know he’d told me? Did he phone you up?"

"No," said John. "He didn’t. But Mycroft paid me a visit last night."

"Oh," said Gabe, looking relieved. "He’s been busy."

"I take it he came to see you, too?" John asked.

"Oh, yes." Gabe nodded, smiled what seemed to be a genuine smile.

"He terrifies me, always has. Sherlock had the scariest big brother of everyone, even back then. He used to joke about it, call him his archenemy. I don’t think Mycroft was too happy about that."

John couldn’t stand it, not one single minute more. He needed to get out from there. He just needed a confirmation.

"So, you’ll reconsider, then?" he asked.

"Yeah," Gabe eventually replied. "Yes I will. John, thank you, I guess."

John reached into his pocket.
“The keys to Baker Street. I think Sherlock wanted you to have them.”

He turned around and made his way out as fast as he could without running. A taxi rolled by just as he got out on the street, and he hailed it, got in. And then he realized he didn’t have an address to give the cabbie.

"Just drive,’ he said. ”Just drive please.”

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In a city with almost nine million inhabitants, one could hardly expect to run into the one of those nine million that one so desperately wanted to see. In fact, it was highly unlikely. Yet John did, more than once. *What do we say about the universe?*

The first time it happened was in December, almost exactly six months after he had closed the door to 221B Baker Street, walked away without looking back, and then handed over the key.
Chapter 19

SHERLOCK

Objectively, everything really was so much better. Even Sherlock himself could see it.

The days and nights had clearer borders now, were more defined, instead of seamlessly slipping into and out of each other like they had used to, before.

He was alone when he wanted to, in the quiet retreat at Baker Street; his haven for solitude and thinking and exhaling.

But he did not have to be lonely. And although he would never admit it, company at regular intervals seemed to do him good. Extended periods of isolation, not so much. He was beginning to discover those things, now.

In a surprising turn of events, Dr. Riyat had turned out to share his passion for quantifiable measures. For the first two months, he’d encouraged Sherlock to keep a record of different situations and how they made him think and feel. It had been quite interesting, actually.

And when he, now and then, had let himself slip away from the world for a little too long, Gabe would text him with some transparent excuse of why he needed Sherlock to come home. Home? Didn’t really seem like the right word, although he knew that as far as everyone else was concerned, Knightsbridge was where he lived.

Sometimes he thought that it was the years living with John that had ruined it for him. Made it impossible to go back to the one man island where he had been so comfortable before.

He had followed through on his resolve. Had taken the all the advice that had been freely heaped upon him, and put it into action, firmly refusing himself to start second-guessing. Not unexpectedly, the people on his list had turned out to be big fans of Gabe. That was the reaction he usually elicited, Sherlock had learnt through the years.

When Sherlock had gathered courage to ask some of them about John, they had all gotten a pained expression in their eyes, started talking about how great Gabe was. Said that Sherlock should ‘let the past be in the past’. Proceeded to litter his mind with more truisms.

He’d heeded their advice, anyway. Did not trust himself to know what was right, anymore.

And here he was now, six months later, and everyone around him seemed so bloody pleased. He was working less, eating better, sleeping more, had not come close to drugs again.

So why was it that whenever he thought about John, he still felt like he wanted to curl up and cry?

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He tried hard not to think about John.

Tried so hard.

But he had hidden John’s identity discs, nestled them inside a tied up scarf, pushed it all the way back in his underwear drawer.
And sometimes, when Gabe was out of town and the ache in his chest got too strong, Sherlock would take them out. He would sleep with the chain around his neck, holding the tags in his hand, feel the cold metal slowly warm up to body temperature. *The second law of thermodynamics; the heat flows from the hotter body to the colder one until they reach a mutual thermodynamic equilibrium.*

On those nights, he would allow the memories of John to flood him, just for a while. Nobody would know, so he was allowed.

The first night he’d spent at Baker Street, ten weeks after everything happened. That was when he’d found John’s note. Good thing he’d been alone.

Dr. Riyat had said that he was allowed to phone him, in emergencies and if he’d tried the things on the checklist and they didn’t help.

He had tried, they didn’t help, he had called.

He had still cried that night, slumped down on the bathroom floor.

But he hadn’t given in to the obvious solution.

And for that, he was immensely proud.

**JOHN**

It was winter in London, and an arctic chill held the city in an iron grip since a few days back. The snow on the streets was piling up, making the traffic slow and chaotic despite the frantic plowing and salting.

On the news, they had talked about a blizzard approaching tonight, and John had tried to finish up at the clinic quick in order to make it home before it hit with full force.

In March, he was set to move out, but they had agreed that they would both stay in the house until Anna’s first birthday. John was sleeping in the guest room in the basement. All in all, it was working out acceptably, but he was still counting the days to the move.

Once or twice a week, he and Mary would have dinner together in the evening, but usually he would arrange it so that they’d take turns with Anna while the other person was off doing something else.

The hours he spent with his daughter was the only time, really, that he actually felt a bit like himself again. Felt joy.

Mary's crazy outbursts had successively gotten less frequent, and for that, he was very grateful. It had been pure hell in the beginning, truth be told. She was unpredictable and moody, and he could never be sure what would await him. A few times in the beginning, she’d taunted him about Sherlock, but it seemed like he’d managed to put an effective stop to that, now. Perhaps even Mary could tell when John Watson was close to be pushed beyond the edge of self restraint.

During those first few months, in the summer, she had often called him at work, yelling and shouting abuse, and on many occasions he'd seen no other alternative than to get in the car and go over there, to make sure Anna was okay.
Thankfully, she always had been. Mary seemed to never cross that line, and eventually, John was able to relax a bit in that knowledge. He still worried, though, about how Mary would react when he’d move out.

But except for Mary’s randomness, life had settled into a predictable, mind numbing lull. He didn't have any objections to the mind numbing part, though, because it was hard enough anyway to keep the despair at bay sometimes.

Especially at night, when everything was quiet around him, and the ruminative thoughts about his life in general, and Sherlock in particular, had free reign.

In the six months that had passed, John hadn't seen Sherlock, not even once. Not that he expected to. Or maybe that wasn't quite true.

Whenever he was away from home or work, he would constantly keep an eye out for dark curls or a swirling coat. Many times, he had thought it had been him. Every time, his heart had jumped, his breathing had stopped. But it was never Sherlock, no, why would it be. What were the odds.

He desperately longed to see him, but at the same time, worried about it. Had no idea of how such a meeting might turn out, and he was afraid it would tear open the wounds that hadn't really even begun to heal.

As much as he could, he avoided the area around Regent's Park, hadn't been near Baker Street since that last time.

Sometimes, work matters would make it necessary to visit Bart's Hospital, and on those occasions, he would always be extra vigilant. Hoping and fearing to meet him. So far, he hadn’t.

One Friday night in July, a creeping dread had come over John, as he was sitting in front of the telly in the sparsely furnished guest bedroom, eating dinner straight out of the take out bag. He couldn’t shake the feeling. He needed to know how Sherlock was doing.

He had sent a text to Mycroft, and gotten a prompt reply. It had said that everything was just fine and that he needn’t worry.

That was… good, of course. Of course it was.
Chapter 20

The trains and city busses had all been cancelled, and out on the street, people were practically fighting over the few taxis that were still out. The relentless snowfall had turned everything white, and it was impossible to see more than a few feet ahead.

From the window in his office, John had already seen a very near crash when a taxi had failed to slow down in time for the red light. Although in London, the cabbies were usually excellent drivers, many of them were still inexperienced with how to handle the car in heavy snow.

He sent a thought to the colleagues working in the emergency rooms tonight, it would probably be a busy night for them.

A strong gust of wind hit John with snow and small icy particles, cutting into the skin on his face, as he stepped out on the sidewalk outside the clinic. It was six o’clock already and he realized that if he wanted to sleep in his own bed tonight, there was only one thing for him to do. He started to walk.

In ideal weather conditions, the walk would probably take about an hour and a half. Now, he figured most likely three, maybe even more. John pulled the hood of his parka over his head and put on the gloves that he had shoved into his pocket this morning in a lucky guess. With a determined pace, he started to trudge through the ever building snow.

After walking for thirty minutes, John still hadn’t even made it out of the city. The snow on the ground was reaching up over his ankles now, and for every step, he had to pull his foot free from the grip of the thick, wet snow into which it had sunk.

He had lost count of how many times his shoes had come off, and sorely missed the combat boots he’d used to wear in Kandahar. They would have gotten him home a whole lot faster, and dryer too. He cursed quietly as he kept on walking.

He was not surprised when he saw it, but still felt that surge of adrenaline as he came across the scene. There was a taxi, parked right on the crosswalk, it’s engine turned off but headlights still beaming, one door left open.

A crowd of ten to fifteen people had gathered around it, and from somewhere within it came a woman’s panicky screams. As John approached, he heard a man’s voice calling out.

"Is there a doctor here?!” the man’s voice carried over the gusts of wind. "Find a doctor! Call an ambulance!”

John’s colleagues would sometimes complain about situations like this. Would bitch about how they hated being disturbed on their free time, having to assist with what would almost always be a heart attack or a stroke.

John secretly despised them for it. Well, sometimes he’d say it to them, too. He felt that it was a doctor’s duty to use their knowledge and skills when they were needed, and if that could save a life, well that would most certainly take precedent over the need to finish your coffee.

Fighting the snow, John managed to speed up into a jogging pace. He pushed through the crowd, calling out the familiar words.

"I’m a doctor, let me through, I’m a doctor!”
On the ground in front of the car, a woman was lying motionless, her right leg bent at an unnatural angle. Leaning over her was a man, and it took John less than a millisecond to recognize the long coat, the dark curls. His heart stopped.

"Sherlock," was all he managed to get out.

Sherlock turned around at lightening’s speed, his mouth literally falling open, wide eyes staring at John in complete disbelief. John realized he was probably doing the exact same thing. He couldn’t move, felt glued in place. He just stood there, looking down at Sherlock - it really was him! - kneeling on the snow covered street.

The snow in his hair had made Sherlock’s curls twist tighter than usual. His ears and the tip of his nose were red from the cold, he had a thick woolen scarf wrapped around his neck, and John was unable to form a single thought.

"John," said Sherlock, after they had been staring at each other for seconds that had felt like an eternity. And then he smiled. Broke out in a big, unshielded, teethy grin, and John was completely floored.

"Right on cue,” Sherlock said. "I was just calling out for a doctor.”

"I heard you.” John grinned back, still not moving, dizzy with happiness. It seemed neither of them could tear their eyes away from the other.

"Perhaps you should attend to the patient?” Sherlock said after a moment, smiling.

John managed to shake himself alive.

"Perhaps I should,” he said, getting down to put two fingers on the woman’s pulse point at her wrist, simultaneously checking her respiration. With Sherlock’s eyes practically burning a hole in his neck, he was trying to make a quick appraisal of her status.

It was, however, nearly impossible to focus on anything else but the tall, lanky man kneeling next to him. John stole a quick glance. Snowflakes were sprinkled all over his hair and his shoulders. In the headlights of the car, he was lit from behind. It was like he was shining, and John thought he looked almost outer-worldly. Perhaps he was.

John decided that there really wasn’t that much he could do for the woman. She was breathing and conscious, but of course John was well aware that around eighty percent of car accident victims would have a head injury of some sort.

All he could do was to keep her immobile, calm and warm until help arrived. He was chatting away in the manner he always talked to badly injured patients, just nonsense small talk, anything to distract them from their fear and to lessen the trauma.

He had chucked off his big down parka and put it over her, yet he didn’t feel cold. He turned back to look at Sherlock, who had not taken his eyes off John the entire time.

They didn’t say a word, just kept grinning foolishly at each other, and John felt Sherlock’s happy smile warm him deep inside; thawing his frozen core.

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The ambulance arrived within something that may have been only a few minutes; John wasn’t sure because for him, time seemed to have stopped. He gave the paramedics a brief report of what he
had gathered, and then assisted as they moved the woman to the stretcher.

A uniformed woman from the ambulance crew came up to ask them for their identity cards.

"The police will want to take your statements, but it will probably take them a while to get here on a night like this. I’m afraid you’re not allowed to leave the scene before then.” She made an apologetic gesture.

"You can’t possibly expect us to stand out here to wait!” Sherlock said. ”It could take an eternity! We’ll be dead from hypothermia before anybody gets here, and then you will have even more to do!”

The woman turned her head to look around.

"Alright,” she said. ”See the restaurant across the street? I’ll tell them they can find you both there. But you cannot leave, understood?”

They had stepped inside the restaurant to discover there were only a handful of guests there, although the kitchen seemed quite busy preparing take-out orders. Poor delivery guys, John thought fleetingly as they made their way to a table near the window and close to a hot radiator.

"We might as well have a bite, don’t you think?” Sherlock had said when they were seated, and John had nodded in amazed agreement.

It was absolutely, utterly, and completely unreal. An hour ago, he’d been trudging through the snow with a blank mind, it had been just another night, albeit one with bad weather.

And now, here he was, sitting at a narrow table at a restaurant, with Sherlock on the opposite side. A smiling Sherlock, even. Perhaps he should pinch himself to see if it was really happening.

"You’ll have to forgive my terrible manners, John, but I really need to do this,” Sherlock said, and proceeded to take off his shoes and socks. He placed the black socks on the radiator behind him and put the shoes right beneath it.

"As always, you’re a step ahead,” John said and went about to do the same thing.

He was beginning to feel the effects of kneeling on the ground in nothing but a shirt, a jumper and a pair of cotton trousers, so he kept his parka draped over his shoulders in an effort to warm up.

A waitress came up to give them their menus; it appeared to be some sort of bistro place. She took out a lighter and lit the small tea candle that was sitting in a holder on the table. John thought about that first night, at Angelo’s, and smiled at the memory. He felt a little embarrassed when Sherlock caught his eye; of course he’d read his mind.

"Seems like yesterday, that night,” Sherlock said with a faint smile.

"Yeah,” said John. "It sure does.”

How badly he wished that it had been yesterday, and that he could get another try. So many things he would do differently.

"You look well,” he said to Sherlock, then instantly regretted it. He really had not meant to imply anything about drugs, and certainly not within the first five minutes after they’d sat down, yet that
was probably precisely how it had come across to Sherlock.

"I am," he replied thoughtfully. "I think I’ve learned a few things about myself," he said, looking quite awkward at the topic.

"I’m glad to hear that," John said gently. He was. He shifted a bit in his chair, trying to find another way to place his legs under the small table.

As he did, and purely by accident, one of his bare feet came into contact with Sherlock’s equally sockless one. It sent what felt like an electrical shock throughout his body. He immediately removed his foot.

"I’m sorry," said Sherlock, blushing.

John laughed. "That was hardly your fault," he said, and was relieved when Sherlock smiled back at him again.

"Your feet are rather cold," Sherlock said. "You should put them up, here." He indicated to the radiator behind him.

"It’s not enough that we took our shoes and socks off in a restaurant; now you think I should put my dirty feet up on their radiator?" John said, so happy the easy mood had returned again.

"I’m quite certain they’re no dirtier than your socks, and they are already up there."

"Good point," John said and then proceeded to stretch out his legs on the side of the table, to resolutely rest his feet on the top of the old fashioned, green radiator. Then, just for the heck of it, he leaned back on his chair, balanced it precariously on the rear two legs.

Sherlock laughed and looked delighted, and that warmed John more than any heat source ever could.

They ordered food and drinks, and after a while, the waitress returned with a bread basket, some olive oil and sea salt, as well as the two glasses of red wine that they had ordered. Sherlock suddenly got a worried expression on his face.

"Erm," he said, "alcohol has never been, er, problematic for me-"

"Oh god, I know that!" John interrupted, feeling horrible for Sherlock. "You do not need to explain or excuse yourself to me. You know that, right?"

Sherlock seemed to relax a bit again.

"Yes, I believe I do," he said, and then added in a mumbling voice, his eyes fixed firmly on the checkered table cloth, "I just don’t want you to think I’m not taking it seriously. Because I really am."

John nodded, but he was very unsure of what to say next. Or rather, how to phrase it and how to find the courage to bring it up. Finally, he just decided to get it done. There would be no more elephants in the room this time.

"Sherlock," he began carefully, and saw him immediately tense up again. "I’m sorry if I’ll make you uncomfortable now, but I just have to say it."

At this point, Sherlock looked as if he was about to pass out or maybe have some sort of panic
attack. John knew he had to do it, anyway.

"I am so very, very sorry for what happened that night," he said, slowly. "I made some terrible mistakes, and you were the one who had to pay for them. I really need you to know that hurting you was the last thing I ever wanted to do." He closed his eyes for a moment, shook his head. "Please accept my apology."

Sherlock was blinking furiously, and John’s heart ached for him. He wished so much that he could just go around the table and hug him.

Eventually, Sherlock spoke.

"Of course I forgive you, John," he said in a small voice, only meeting John’s eyes for brief, scattered moments. "Did that a long time ago. And I hope that if it’s not too much to ask, you can find it in you to forgive me. I’m so sorry I couldn’t… The timing, er- It was too difficult for me to—"

Sherlock grew quiet, kept his eyes averted, and John silently waited to see if he would continue. They were both startled when Sherlock’s phone began to ring in his coat pocket. He took it out and looked at the screen.

"I’m sorry, John, I’d better get this," Sherlock said, appearing extremely awkward. John was uncomfortable as well, but figured it was probably nothing compared to Sherlock, judging by the look of him.

Sherlock had leaned away from the table and John noticed he was keeping his voice down as much as at all possible. He’s trying to spare me from this conversation. Still, John could hear every word. He turned to look out the window, tried to not be intrusive.

"No, I told you… wasn’t hurt at all… I was only the passenger… no I think she’ll live… The police are making us wait… What? Just, er, the other witness… No, I’m having dinner now. I’ll see you at home, okay? Alright… yes, me too."

Listening to the conversation, John’s heart dropped. This was the reality of it all, he thought. While he was miserably lonely, Sherlock had clearly moved on. It was useless to try to delude himself into thinking otherwise. Completely useless.

A tense silence followed after Sherlock hung up. Might as well face it, John thought.

"So, how’s Gabriel?" he asked, forcing his face into something he hoped would be perceived as friendly.

Sherlock looked like he wanted to sink through the floor, and honestly, John wanted to do the exact same thing at this point.

"Good, er, thank you. He’s… good. Lots of work and, er, things… yes."

Sherlock then looked up at him again, smiled a careful, polite smile.

"How’s your daughter? And Mary?"

So here it was, the million dollar question. Or rather, the million dollar reply. How to answer? John took a sip of his wine to buy a little more time to decide.

He wanted to tell Sherlock everything. That was his strongest impulse. Tell him that he’d followed
through with the divorce, explain that he was going to move out. Tell him how intensely he still missed him, and how he’d do anything for a second chance to make it right again.

However. He had not forgotten what it had led to, the last time he pushed ahead with his own needs. He’d made a promise, back then, to not be the cause of any more distress for Sherlock.

He watched him sitting across the table. Eating. He was actually eating. And he was so close that John could reach out his hand and touch his cheek if he wanted to. He did want to. Christ, help me, he thought in a silent plea, even though he wasn’t particularly religious.

Sherlock did indeed look well. Still impossibly lean, of course, but far from that gaunt, skin-and-bone figure he’d been after John’s wedding. He also seemed to be, John searched for the right word - happier. Happier was the word that came up.

John realized he should be glad, for Sherlock’s sake. And of course he was, in a way. Was enormously grateful that Sherlock seemed to have been able to put the drugs behind him, that he’d gotten back on his feet again. He ought to be thrilled to see that he was doing fine.

But maybe he was a terrible person, because he just wasn’t able to feel it, at least not full on. It was just that… he’d wanted Sherlock to be happy with him. Had wished so bad for them to be happy, together.

It was easy to talk about Anna for a while. He was so proud of her, and Sherlock was smiling when John told him about the adventures of getting her to try real food for the first time, or how she’d laugh when he’d sing to her. How she loved furry animals and music and soap bubbles.

But what to say about Mary? John took one more good look at Sherlock. Told himself it was for him.

*He jumped off a roof for me, he was the best man at my wedding even though he apparently had feelings for me then. He killed a man for me. I can do this for him.*

Do it for Sherlock.

"Mary’s fine, thank you,” he replied. "Just fine."

Shortly after, two police officers stepped into the restaurant. After fifteen minutes of questions, and two signed statements, they all got up to leave. Outside the window, the snow was still coming down hard.

"I’m sorry we had to keep you fellas waiting for so long,” one of the officers said. "If you’d like, we could give you a lift home. No weather to be out walking in, tonight."

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He was sitting next to Sherlock in the backseat of the police car, as it slowly moved through the London streets. They’d given their respective addresses to the policeman driving the car.

John had once again felt an almost physical pain when he didn’t allow himself to explain to Sherlock why he was still living with Mary. The pain had not exactly become any less when Sherlock had proceeded to give not the Baker Street address, but one near Hyde Park instead.

They pulled up outside an impressive brick building. A uniformed porter in a heavy coat stood shuddering just outside the entrance, he watched the police car with curious eyes.

"Well, at least now the neighbors will have something to talk about,” Sherlock tried to joke. John
could tell he was nervous.

"It was really great to see you, Sherlock," John said. And then he thought, damn it! Just damn it all. "I’ve missed you, you know. More than I can say."

Sherlock didn’t seem to know where to look for a little while. Then his eyes met John’s.

"Yes, it was great," he said. John thought he looked a bit sad, but he couldn’t be sure.

He’d clung to a faint hope that Sherlock would say something at the last minute, suggest they get together again sometimes, something like that. He didn’t.

But just before he got out of the car, Sherlock paused, hesitated.

"I’ve really missed you too, John," he said, then smiled a little, and John felt something similar to happiness spreading through his veins.

Sherlock shut the car door, and John followed him with his gaze until he had disappeared inside the building.

********************

The next time John would run into Sherlock, it would already be summer again. A heat wave would linger over London, and life would be starting to seem a bit more worth living.

John would be walking through Regent’s Park on a Saturday afternoon, and a brown and white dog would come up to him, tail frantically wagging. In the dog’s jaws, a rabbit, almost but not completely dead.

By then, John was finally living in his own flat, conveniently located in between Mary’s new place and the hospital where his new job was at. It was Mike Stamford who’d pushed him to go to the interview. John had stubbornly refused at first, but now he was so grateful that Mike had kept on insisting.

"For Christ’s sake, John!" Mike had spoken up at lunch one day, surprising him with an unusual level of frustration in his normally so mild tone. "You’ve really got to get your act together. It’s been a year, and honestly, no one is going to do it for you. This job is just what you need, I’m telling you."

Then Mike had looked at him sternly. John hadn’t even thought the man had it in him to make that kind of face.

"It’s either that, or you start taking those goddamn antidepressants I gave you," Mike had said. "Frankly, John, I’m getting seriously tired of seeing you like this."

John had been too surprised to argue.

That evening, in his quiet flat, John had really thought about it, long and hard. Eventually, he’d made up his mind. Mike was right. It was time to start getting back on track.

He’d aced the interview, which in itself had been a great boost.

Being a surgeon again, at an emergency trauma unit no less, had indeed turned out to be a perfect fit for an ex-soldier like John Watson. He thrived on the unpredictability, the life-or-death drama, the race against the clock. Got a fix from it, actually.
Just as someone once had pointed out to him.
"All I’m trying to say, is that it could be a fantastic opportunity. You should at least go there, hear what they have to say!” Gabe was going on and on about this damn thing, wouldn’t let it go. It was starting to drive Sherlock crazy.

"I. do. not. want. that. job.” he replied. He could hear his own respiration through his nostrils, hard, controlled puffs of air.

Sherlock quickened his steps, forcing Gabe to do the same to keep an even pace. They were walking though Regent’s Park, it was a Saturday afternoon in July. The heat was oppressive, and they were both sweating. Sherlock intensely wished he’d insisted on taking this walk alone.

"Why are you being so impossible about this! Molly said she thinks it’s equal parts research and teaching. You’d get full access to the lab, you know, you’d get your own assistants, and she even said they’d let you choose freely what you want to focus your research on. Think of the opportunities! And then you’d teach part time!”

"I’m quite certain I’d make a horrible teacher;” Sherlock mumbled, irritated at this relentless nagging.

"No, I’d think you’d be great! Just imagine! You could be that mad-but-brilliant professor that everybody would fear! And those kids would all look up to you. You’d get to shape their young, impressionable minds. Brainwash them with the scientific method. I think you’d love it! Can’t you see, Sherlock? It’d be perfect for you!” He looked at Sherlock with some sort of puppy eyes.

"Perfect for you, you mean,” Sherlock replied, feeling more and more angry.

"That’s not fair. But yes, I’ll admit I would really be happy if you took this position. I don’t think you understand how stressful it is for me, when you’re out on cases and I don’t know where you are! I can’t even sleep because of all the constant worry, it’s driving me mad. Like this last week, for example. You were away for three fucking nights, and didn’t have the decency to check in with me at all. Not even once.”

"Oh, I’m so terribly sorry last week was stressful for you. Because, you know, I just had the time of my life, socializing undercover with those lovely mafia bosses.” He scoffed.

"Yeah you know what Sherlock, I kind of suspect you did have the time of your life. But you have to grow up at some point. Hell, we’re almost forty! You can’t keep doing this forever; running around the world, solving crimes, chasing criminals. It’s time to start thinking about your future!”

"Yes, thanks dad, I’ll keep it in mind.”

"Oh just stop it. Act like a goddamn adult, for once. Let me ask you this. What the hell do you intend to do when you’re, say, sixty-five? Because I guarantee you, by then, even you will be too old to keep this up! What are your plans for when that time comes?”

"Bees.”

"What? What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Gabe was waving his arms around. He looked angry.

"I intend to keep bees. Fascinating creatures, you know.”
"Come off it, will you! You always do this. It’s impossible to have a decent conversation with you. Why can’t you discuss this with me like a normal person?"

"Perhaps because I’m not ‘normal’. I would have expected you to have figured that out by now. Why is it so hard for you to understand, Gabe. I don’t want that sort of life!”

Gabriel looked away, sighed. Sherlock thought briefly about the experiment he wanted to get started back at Baker Street. He should probably try to pick up a few supplies on the way back. Pig eyes. They were remarkably similar to human eyes, would do for this particular thing. Maybe the butcher would have some to give him. They were usually very accommodating.

Gabe was talking again, now in a more subdued voice.

"No…” he said. "We always talk about what you want, what you need. I don’t know if it ever occurs to you that I have needs, too? Dreams. goals. Things I want from my life. You never want to hear it.”

Sherlock thought this was a bit odd. He had no recollection of conversations like that with Gabe, no, none that he could think of.

"Er, what is it that you want, then?” he asked. "What do you want in your life that is currently missing?” Yes. That seemed like the appropriate thing to ask. Sherlock felt secretly pleased with himself. Great question. Caring, open ended.

Perhaps if he could get nine eyeballs, then he could do a more elaborate design. That would probably be more efficient. He could do two experimental groups and one control group. Or maybe it’d be better to-

"You could at least acknowledge what I said!" Gabe was shouting. Oops. A bit not good. Seemed quite upset, now.

"I’m sorry,” Sherlock tried. “What… what was it that you said, again? I, eh, lost focus for a little while-”

Gabe looked at him, intensely. Sherlock thought he’d better try to listen this time.

"Do you do this on purpose, Sherlock? Pretend not to hear me, when I say things you don’t like?” Furrow between his eyes, restricted pupils. Angry, upset.

"No, of course not. I’m sorry. Please come again?”

"I said,” he begun, then seemed to hesitate for a moment. "I was saying, that, you know… I’ve been thinking a lot about children.”

Sherlock’s mind blanked for a brief moment.

"Children? What about them?”

"The older I get, the more I feel that I-” he paused, ”that kids would be a wonderful thing to have in my life.” He spoke quietly.

Sherlock felt a rush of panic. He thought that he probably should reply in a good way, a nice way, but couldn’t stop himself.

"First of all, you know I don’t even like children. Secondly, I don’t want to be tied down. And
thirdly, if I were able to conceive, that would surely have happened by now, don’t you think?”

Uh oh. A bit rude, perhaps. But he meant it. Meant every word.

Gabe stopped in his tracks. Sherlock did, too.

"You’re mean,” he said. "I don’t deserve this.”

Sherlock thought that maybe he should feel worried, or something. Upset? But he didn’t. He felt calm and convinced. It was as if he, all of a sudden, could see the true nature of things. Deep down within him, he was finally able to feel what he wanted.

"I'm sorry,” he said. "I don’t intend to be mean to you. And I agree, you deserve nothing but good things, Gabe. You’re a good person. But I think we need to reevaluate the nature of our relationship.”

And even though he could see it was hurting him, it felt like a massive weight had been lifted off his chest. He could breathe again.

After a while, they had parted ways, and Sherlock had decided to keep walking. It was such a beautiful day, sunshine and birds and butterflies in the park.

He thought about John. It was good, to be allowed to think about John without feeling guilty. He wondered what John was doing today. Thought that the world could never be too bad, as long as John Watson was out there somewhere. He smiled.

*****************************************************************************

Sherlock was idly leaning back in the leather sofa at Baker Street. A streak of sunlight made it through the open window, creating a lovely warmth where it fell across his arms and chest.

Must have dozed off for a while. Didn’t matter, he had nothing particular to do today, anyway. Perhaps later, he’d put on some proper clothes and make his way to Daunt Books, the Edwardian bookshop on Marylebone High Street. He could spend hours there, getting lost between the shelves, always walking out with a bag full of books he hadn’t even known he wanted before coming in.

He’d collected his things from Knightsbridge, suffered through a few talks. But for the last two weeks, everything had finally been sorted, and he was now firmly settled at Baker Street again.

It was the oddest thing, but coming back had felt like some sort of awakening.

What the hell have I been doing for so long? he had wondered, the first morning when he’d woken up in his own bed, in his own place, feeling at peace for the first time in… he didn’t know. Too long. Way too long.

It was great beyond belief to be back. Back to his flat, back to his life, back to himself.

Another strange thing, coming back, had been to notice that the thoughts of John had taken on a different character. It was difficult to put into words.

But it was like.. it wasn’t always painful to think about John, anymore. The memories of all that had happened and everything they’d been through - they could also be a source of joy, sometimes.

He still missed him, of course, missed him terribly. Still had nights when everything would just
hurt too goddamn much, and he’d grasp the identity discs - he wore them constantly now - extra tight to try to go to sleep. But then, there would also be times when thinking about John would make him smile.

Every single day since their chance meeting, Sherlock had pondered calling John. He wanted to see him, wanted it so desperately.

But then, there was that one question.

Why, why, why hadn't John mentioned his divorce, that night in December?

It would have been so easy for him to say something. But yet he hadn’t.

Sherlock just couldn't let it go.

When he had been sitting with John at that restaurant, after their chance meeting in the snow, any idiot could have seen that John wasn't wearing his wedding ring. For Sherlock, there had of course been a whole array of other indications. It had been so glaringly obvious he might as well have carried it around on a neon sign.

And yet, when he'd asked him about Mary, John had only replied 'fine'.

Had not wanted Sherlock to know.

The only reason he could think of: John wanted to keep him at a distance, now. Maybe Sherlock had disappointed him beyond repair.

The horrible, gut wrenching thought that maybe John didn't want him, anymore.

Why had he wanted to conceal it?

Sherlock had tried to get Dr. Riyat to provide him with an answer. Had used all his skills. Coerced, manipulated, pushed, begged. Yes, alright, there might have been a tiny bit of threatening involved, as well.

The only thing it had led to, was that one day, Dr. Riyat had snapped. Sherlock was actually kind of surprised that it hadn’t happened sooner.

“Sherlock, please, give it a rest!” he had exclaimed, putting his notepad down on the table with a loud thump. There had been an unusual frustration in his voice. “I majored in Psychology, not Mind Reading!”

“Well that was stupid of you,” Sherlock had mumbled in return.

“I don't know the answer to this question,” Dr. Riyat had continued, back to his normal, gentle manners again. “Every thing I could say would be a guess. The only way for you to find out, is to ask him directly. But if you do, I want you to be certain you are strong enough to handle all potential answers, okay?”

And Sherlock had thought that maybe, just this once, ignorance was bliss.

But he ruminated about this damn thing, constantly.

Every day, he’d wake up with the same question.

*Should I call John?*
And at the end of every day, the same answer.

*I’ll do it tomorrow.*
It was another Saturday, a few weeks later. It was sunny and still hot, and Sherlock was back in the park.

He’d settled into a routine of taking an afternoon walk, did it almost every day when he wasn't on a case. Usually he would take the clock-wise path around Regent’s Park. He’d begin at Boating Lake, walk up past the zoo and then make his way back again.

He loved this park so much.

“Mr. Holmes, gosh, I can't believe it!”

A client, from years ago. Her brother in law had turned out to have been scheming to lay his hands on the family fortune, and it had been a very close call that he'd managed to finish off his entire extended family when this woman had stumbled upon his plans. He’d solved it in less than twenty-four hours.

Sherlock had immediately noticed all the signs of agitation, but hadn't yet figured out the exact reason for it. Then again, she'd only been standing in front of him for a few seconds.

He was getting there, but saw that she was about to tell him, anyway.

“I'm sorry I'm such a mess,” she said. “I would have loved to stay and chat for a while--” Sherlock was very glad to hear that was not going to happen “--but my dog just ran away! Took after a rabbit. It's so terrible, Mr. Holmes, I've got to find her! My husband has said that if it ever happens again, he will have her put down!” She looked like she was about to burst out in tears.

Sherlock thought that a pro bono case with a missing dog, albeit one with a murderous streak, really didn't make the cut, didn't even rate as a one, frankly. But he was in an excellent mood, and had nowhere in particular to be.

It was just nice to be outside, enjoying this particularly splendid summer afternoon. Plus, he’d always liked dogs. *The regular ones, at least.*

“What does your dog look like? And in which direction did it go?” he asked, and was grateful that the woman resisted her obvious impulse to give him a hug.

Finding a dog was not at all like finding a person. Far too many random variables, not much to go on. If one wanted to find a missing dog, the utilization of another dog was the best way to go about it. But now, he would have to make do with himself.

Having been told the breed, he was able to make a quick estimate of the dog's running speed and hunting pattern. His intimate knowledge of the park's topography made it possible to arrive at a
rough approximation of where the dog might be located at this point.

He got her phone number, then started to jog towards the southern part of the park, closer to Baker Street. Approaching Boating Lake, an area where the open parkland turned a little more dense with trees, Sherlock heard a dog barking. The bark was consistent with the breed as well as the size and age of this particular dog. He sped up and kept moving in the direction of the sound.

He went around a small hill with trees and bushes, and then stopped dead. John.

He felt his knees buckle.

John was dressed quite properly, in sand-coloured cotton trousers, a pressed white shirt and brown brogues. His skin was tanned, his hair two shades blonder. The hair on his arms was lighter, too. He looked the way he always used to do in the summer. Impossibly handsome.

The brown and white dog, the same one as Sherlock had just been shown a picture of, was dancing at John's feet, frantically wagging its tail, happily barking.

And dangling from John's right hand, a dead rabbit.

On John's side, but at a respectful distance, stood a small group of people - three men and one woman. Japanese, Sherlock deduced. In London for a convention. Arrived yesterday, flew British Airways, took the evening flight from Narita Airport.

Researchers or physicians. No wait; both. All were dressed in black suits, the woman had a knee long skirt but was otherwise dressed about the same as the men. They were closely following the interaction, displaying signs of amusement, hidden under a controlled facade.

In front of John were three women, aggressively facing him, all of them appearing quite worked up.

“I am going to report you to the police!” one of the women yelled. “You are a monster! A murderer!”

“I'm not a murderer!” John shouted back, and in doing so, he gestured with the limp animal in his grip, no doubt unintentionally.

John hadn't seen him yet, too caught up in the situation at hand. Sherlock, as always, could not resist a dramatic entrance.

“I doubt you’d pass a polygraph test with that statement,” he said, trying to keep a straight face but it just wasn't doable. He knew he was smiling.

John inhaled sharply, and actually took a step back when he'd noticed Sherlock. It took him a moment to overcome the shock, so similar to how he'd reacted that time in December, when they had stumbled upon one another in the blizzard.

“Sherlock!” he whispered, fully turned away from the people around him. His eyes were shining, and Sherlock thought that hearing his name in John’s voice, was a more beautiful sound than any music ever composed.

“I seem to have gotten myself into a slightly sticky situation,” he added in a low voice, grinning. Sherlock didn't think that anyone could ever have a more perfect smile.

“Well, offing small furry animals is generally frowned upon in our society,” Sherlock replied,
trying very hard to not break out laughing. He saw John was fighting the same thing.

The angry woman started to shout at John again. She looked like she was ready to physically attack him. Good luck with that, Sherlock thought and felt his smile turning into an ever wider one.

“I saw what you did! You killed this beautiful creature with your bare hands! People like you should be locked up!”

John turned away from Sherlock to face the woman again.

“Consider it euthanasia,” John retorted, still smiling a bit. “I told you, its spine was snapped in two!”

“You can't know that!” yelled the woman. “It should have been taken to a veterinarian, they could have saved it!”

“Hey, lady,” said John, “I happen to be a doctor. I know a broken spine when I see one. This animal was beyond all hope, and I merely put an end to its suffering. You should be thanking me!”

“Thanking you! For killing a living, innocent being!”

“From the way it was looking, I think the living part can be debated,” John said, and Sherlock heard himself making a strangled sound in an effort not to laugh.

“Hell, the innocent part can probably be questioned, too. You know the expression about rabbits,” John added with a wink to the woman, and Sherlock had to put his hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing out loud at this point. John shot him a quick glance and Sherlock could see he was grinning happily.

Looking at John, it made him feel so strange inside, and yet so perfectly right. Warm, lovely, wonderful. Everything was.

Now the Japanese folks were getting carried away, too, it seemed, desperately trying to stifle their giggles.

“That's it!” the angry woman yelled at John, looking very close to hitting him at this point. “I'm calling the police! Psychopaths like you need to be stopped! Who knows what you'll kill next!” She took out a phone from her handbag.

Sherlock decided it was time to step in. Until now, he'd kept a very low profile, but now he took a few quick steps towards the angry woman. He made sure to school his expression into one of concerned authority.

“That won't be necessary, madam,” he said to the woman. “I'm Detective Inspector Lestrade, from the New Scotland Yard.”

He had fished out the ID card from his wallet, held it up to the group of women.

"I will make sure this man feels the full force of the law. Cruelty to animals is not something we take lightly,” he said and just for the fun of it, shot John a stern look. John looked happy. Happy and very attractive.

“On behalf of the police force, I'd like to thank you for your civil courage. Now please move along and leave this to me.”
Utterly surprised, the women eventually shuffled away, leaving Sherlock alone with John and the group of researchers. The youngest man in the group turned to Sherlock.

“Excuse me, officer, may I please say something?” he asked in excellent English.

Sherlock, still in character, looked at the man and nodded, his eyebrows slightly raised.

“Doctor Watson only did what any good person should have done. We are all emergency physicians, and I think I speak for all of us when I say that it was the correct thing to do. We come from Tokyo, we're only here visiting for a few days, and Doctor Watson has been so very kind to offer to show us around the city and this beautiful park. Doctor Watson is a good man, sir, and we would hate for him to get into any trouble because of us.”

In the corner of his eye, Sherlock saw John following the exchange with ill concealed amusement. He still had the rabbit in his hand. The dog had given up, and had lain down practically on top of John's shoes, panting heavily with its tongue out.

“Is that so?” Sherlock said. He wished he could have continued the conversation in Japanese, since he knew how his proficiency in foreign languages always impressed John, but realized that that would be an unlikely skill for a Yarder. A shame, really.

“Well, alright. You've traveled far, and I wouldn't want to ruin your visit to our fine city. I'll take your word for it, and we'll just forget about this incident, for this time.”

He turned to John.

“Doctor... Watson, was it. While it seems you acted out of moral obligation, I strongly suggest you leave matters like this to the park rangers, next time.”

Oh, the feeling he got in his stomach from seeing John standing there, beaming, looking so amazingly perfect. It was surreal. He didn't want it to end.

Sherlock wanted so badly to say something more. Find a way to meet John, again. He could work it into this little game, even. He toyed with the thought of giving John his card, telling him to come in to give a statement. Something like that would work. John would think it was funny.

Then again, there was that question. What if John didn't want to see him?

Sherlock could see the way John was looking at him. Not much to doubt, there, really. Sherlock could see it, he could feel it. He could even feel it deep within himself, in that intuitive way that he was just beginning to discover.

But he'd been wrong about things like this, before. This was the only area where his skills would falter.

So here he was, standing in the park, realizing that the show he had put on, whilst fun, now effectively prevented him from staying. He wanted to stay.

The group of researchers were obviously waiting for him to leave. But John looked like he was about to say something.

Please, please, please, Sherlock thought. Please say something.

John opened his mouth. Closed it again. Drew a breath; he was so, so close to saying something. What?
Sherlock hoped intensely that John would reach out in some way, open up for a next meeting, a coffee, something, anything. He saw him closing his mouth again, more decisive this time, his eyes briefly averted. He had decided not to. Sherlock's heart fell.

“Okay then,” Sherlock said, and reached down to grab the murderous dog's collar. “I'd better go find the owner of this one.”

He searched for John's eyes, smiled, and when he was certain he was at an angle where the Japanese wouldn't be able to see it, he winked. *I don't know why I do that, people seem to like it-*

He started to walk.

“Hey, Inspector!”

*Yes! Thank you God, yes!* He heard John's quick steps approaching. He stopped, waited, fizzy sensation in his body.

The researchers were still watching, but now from a little distance.

John came up to him, close. He had finally discarded the rabbit. Smiling. Nervous. Hesitant.

“Sherlock, you're crazy,” he whispered. “Er, I just wanted to say - it was good to see you. Real good.”

Happy. Happy happy feelings, even though John didn't say what he had hoped he would.

“You too, John,” he smiled back. “Try to stay out of trouble for a while now, okay?”

John smiled. It very much appeared like he was going to reach out, touch him. A memory flashed by, of John, putting his arms around him in by the kitchen counter at Baker Street.

“Not if trouble means you'll come to my rescue again,” John smiled. Flirty? That was a little bit flirty, wasn't it?

*Please ask please ask please ask.*

He didn’t. It was time to leave. He had to.

“Catch you later, John Watson.”

Sherlock began to walk again, dragging the now sluggish dog along with him. And then, the tingling in his chest grew so much stronger when he heard John mumble.

“Not if I catch you first, Sherlock Holmes.”
The invitation to Greg’s birthday party had arrived through email, and when John met him at the pub after work one evening, he figured he might as well ask.

"I take it you’re still not talking, then?” Greg asked, and John squirmed.

"It’s a little bit complicated,” he said. "But I’ve ran into him a couple of times, and I mean, it’s not like we’re not friends or anything. It’s just- I don’t know, Greg.”

It was awkward, discussing this with him. John sure as hell hadn’t told him anything about what had happened between them, that night, and he didn’t think Sherlock had, either. Still, he still got a weird feeling that perhaps Greg knew. He tried to put it out of his mind, too embarrassed to consider that possibility.

Oh well. Since John had been the one who asked, he guessed he had himself to blame for this conversation.

"What can I tell you, John,” Greg said. "Of course I invited him, but, you know. It’s not like he’s bloody likely to show up.” He chuckled. "Though maybe now with that boyfriend of his, who knows.”

"Yeah,” replied John. This was what he was worrying about, the reason he’d brought it up. He wanted to go to the party, it’d been a long time since he’d seen the people from the Yard and from Bart’s, and he missed them.

And the odd chance, no matter how small, of getting to spend some time with Sherlock, well that was too good to pass up. But, being trapped for an evening seeing Sherlock with that bloke - just the thought of that almost made him feel sick.

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The September air was damp and cool as John made his way from the hospital towards the place where the party was at. He’d decided last minute to not be a coward, because well, John was really anything but.

If worst comes to worst, he thought, I’ll leave. He could still catch up with old friends, and in all likelihood, Sherlock wasn’t going to be there, anyway.

John had alerted Greg that he was going to be late, and as usual, that meant even later that he had expected. It had been a quiet afternoon at the surgery, he’d been catching up on all his paperwork, and even had time to make it out to the lunch room to grab a slice of the cake someone had brought, and refill his coffee for the third time. Decaf, of course, always decaf at work. Couldn’t have any trembling hands in the operating theatre.

But then, just as he was getting ready to leave, a car crash victim had come in and the following two hours had gone by in minutes. Time always seemed to stop when he was in surgery, being so utterly focused at what he was doing.

The patient, a male in his twenties, would survive, and that knowledge made John’s steps lighter as he kept walking. He was looking forward to the party, now. It was going to be fun to see the familiar faces, have a few beers, get his mind off the long work week behind him.
When John got to the party, it was already in full swing; people everywhere. There were a lot of unfamiliar faces in the large crowd, and John was glad when he spotted Molly and Greg, standing next to each other close to the bar. Molly squealed and leaped up to him, gave him a kiss on the cheek. She was clearly a bit tipsy already.

"It’s been way too long,” she’d exclaimed. "You look great, John. And that new job of yours, wow. I hear you’ve become quite the big shot over there!”

John smiled and returned the compliment. She did indeed look beautiful, and John was glad to see she seemed happy.

For reasons unknown, someone had put a flower garland of that Hawaiian type around Greg’s neck. He was wearing a white shirt and was grinning happily as he pulled John into a hug that almost squeezed the wind out of him.


"No, did you?"

"You’ll be pleased to hear that I didn’t! So I guess that makes it a good day for you and a bad for me!” Greg was smiling, and John winced a little when Greg leaned in way too close to his ear, in that way that people only did when drunk.

"And guess who’s here, John!” he said in a sing-song voice to John’s ear, quiet but still loud enough for John to hear over the music. Greg leaned back and met John’s eyes, smiled suggestively, and John damned himself for blushing.

Shit. Wow. Oh god. Sherlock was there. He was somewhere in this very room. John felt like he almost couldn’t breathe.

"Oh, great,” he said, trying so hard to act at least remotely normal. "I’ll have to go find him then, before he takes off.”

He felt Greg’s gaze following him as he started to move across the room.

John’s heart rate increased as he let his eyes roam, searching for those dark curls somewhere in the crowd. He intensely hoped that bloke wouldn’t be there, because if he was, John didn’t think he’d be able to face them.

And there he was. John stopped for a moment before approaching, trying to get his emotions under control.

Sherlock was standing, alone, casually leaned against a wall. He was dressed in a slim, dark suit, and John noticed his hair was a little bit longer than usual. The locks fell in a slightly unruly manner over his head, touching the collar of the suit jacket in the neck.

John got a strong impulse to just walk up to him and run his fingers through his hair. Beautiful, he thought. So goddamn beautiful.

He collected himself and stepped out from the anonymity of the crowd, walked up to Sherlock. He was met with wide eyes, and the feelings that overwhelmed him was nearly making it impossible to think.

"Hi there,” he said, with a tentative smile.
"Hello, John." Sherlock smiled back and John’s last shred of composure crumbled.

"It’s been a while," John said without thinking, and then braced himself for the inevitable comeback.

"Stunning observation. I’m so glad you chose to share it with me."

"Yeah alright, smartass." John smiled and leaned back to the wall, the way Sherlock was standing but sideways, so that he was fully turned towards him. He was disproportionally happy when Sherlock turned to do the same.

"Murdered any more animals, lately?" Sherlock said, with a straight face but an unmistakable glimpse in his eye.

"You’re just on fire tonight, aren’t you?" John crossed his arms, pretending to take offense. He thought he was probably grinning like a fool.

"Maybe I am," said Sherlock, holding his gaze for just a beat too long, and John thought that there really was no mistaking. He’s flirting.

Good God! What if the bloke isn’t here, tonight? What if he’s not even in the picture anymore? John felt very uplifted by the thought. Then again, he had no way of knowing.

They were standing so close, facing each other. The music was loud and a hundred people buzzed around them, but Sherlock was the only one John could see.

"I see you’ve taken up boxing," Sherlock said. "And you’ve gotten a promotion. Chief physician of the Trauma Unit, that’s fantastic John. Congratulations."

"Wow. You deduced that in seconds, didn’t you. That’s… extraordinary." John shook his head in amazement. Not much use for smalltalk when you were with someone who could know everything through a quick glance. It’d been so long since the last time he’d seen Sherlock at work, and it was just as mind blowing as the first time he’d gotten to witness it.

"Humor me," John smiled, "tell me how you deduced it? Go on, impress a guy."

If Sherlock could flirt, there certainly was no reason he couldn’t allow himself to do it a little, as well.

Sherlock, as always, was not hard to persuade.

"Certainly. Boxing first. You have put on eight, no ten pounds in muscle mass since I saw you in December, mainly in your shoulders and legs, which is precisely where a good fighter wants them. You’ve simultaneously lowered your body fat percentage by three percent, at least. Looks good by the way," he added with a smile, causing John to feel his cheeks flush.

"So, that narrows down the kind of activity considerably, has to be something quite strenuous that also requires a lot of total body strength. Then add to that the slight remnants of a bruise on your left cheekbone, you took a punch, and while that could have happened at work, some unruly patient, you also have a slight chip on your right incisor, about two weeks old, indicative of another impact." He caught his breath; one quick inhale, then went on.

"You have abrasions on your knuckles, tell-tale sign of a boxer. There are also remnants of the adhesive from the zink oxide tape you’ve used for protection. I can see by the way you move that your shoulder is hurting more. Boxing probably isn’t the best choice of exercise given your shot
wound; yet understandable in light of your thrill seeking disposition and previous combat training. So, boxing it is. I bet you’re quite good at it.” He faced John with an anticipative look in his eyes.

”That was fantastic, Sherlock, as always. Brilliant, extraordinary,” John marveled.

Sherlock beamed, and as expected continued to fish for more praise.

”You think so?”

”I think you’re amazing,” John blurted out, then felt embarrassed, it wasn’t meant to come out sounding quite so swooning. He tried to cover it up.

”Alright, so what about the promotion then?”

Sherlock looked at John with a smug, superior expression.

”That was quite obvious. Even you should be able to see how.”

John was so happy to hear the usual mockery from Sherlock, it meant that he was in good form. He saw that the corners of his mouth were twitching, he was trying to hold back a smile.

”Go on then, genius, how did you know?”

”Mycroft told me”.

John started to laugh, and Sherlock’s silvery eyes were shining.

This feels good, John thought. Really, really good. They were standing so close, now, and it took John all his willpower to not get in even closer. He realized he had to find out. Had to know what was on the table, here, before he could know how to proceed.

The question had to be posed.

”So, how’s.. Gabriel?” he asked, heart pounding hard in his chest.

”Oh,” said Sherlock, looking awkward. ”Good, I think. I, er, moved out a couple of months ago.” His eyes were firmly fixed on his shoes.

John felt an overwhelming happiness spreading throughout him at a fire’s pace. The possible implications of what Sherlock had just said. He’s available! A second chance. A chance to make it all right again. He felt lightheaded at the possibility.

He needed to reply. Say something appropriate.

”I’m sorry to hear that.”

Silence for a while, Sherlock was still not meeting his eyes.

”Are you?” Sherlock asked.

Sherlock was doing that blinky thing again, and John remembered. He could joke and banter with Sherlock, a lot, and he would love it, would usually be the one who initiated it. But at important moments, complete transparency was required. That, John had finally learned.

What the hell.
"No. Not really," he smiled, and Sherlock looked relieved. But then, John felt he actually, sincerely wanted to say something nice. "He was a good guy though."

"He was, he is. Still friends. But to be honest, it’s a relief."

Sherlock was silent for a while, and John didn’t really know what to say. He was quite uncomfortable talking about this, but his mind was spinning at the new possibilities. And right now, he was standing next to Sherlock. Next to him, so close their arms touched, and maybe he could even dare to-

But not yet. It had been killing him, ever since that night in December. Over the time that had passed since then, he had tried to keep it out of his mind, but more often than not, hadn’t been able to. It had been a more or less constant source of agony, of pain, of restless days and sleepless nights. The fact that he hadn’t been free to tell Sherlock about his divorce.

Now, he realized he was.

"Since your brother told you about my promotion… can I assume he also told you about my divorce?" He held his breath for Sherlock’s response. It took a while before it came.

"I… I knew about that, too," he eventually said, quietly.

"Oh," John said. "Well, good."

"I’m sorry if I was the cause of that,” said Sherlock, almost whispering.

John hated this. He’d always thought it was so hard, this, putting his emotions into words, and even worse, having to say it out loud. His girlfriends in the past had often complained about it, called him a coward and accusing him for shutting them out. He didn’t really think that was fair. It just made him so bloody uncomfortable, and he never seemed to find the right things to say.

Sherlock was silent, looking down. John badly wished they could just skip this part, fast forward it into the future. Unfortunately, there was no such option.

"No," he said. "No, Sherlock, it had nothing to do with-" He stopped himself, thinking that what he was saying wasn’t true, and that Sherlock would obviously see that. He tried again.

"Look. My marriage was a big mistake. Perhaps the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. It would not have lasted, regardless, and truth be told, I wake up every day feeling grateful that it’s over. But of course, realizing how, er, how I felt for you, well that was certainly a push in the right direction."

John stopped talking. Man, all those words and he hadn’t even finished his first beer. He considered briefly to go get a quick shot, or three, at the bar.

"Why didn't you want me to know?” Sherlock asked.

Oh, John thought. Oh no.

"What? No! That wasn’t why-" 

John had seriously had it with these misunderstandings.

"Sherlock, I, um. I didn’t say anything because I felt that I had ruined enough things for you. I wanted to-" he tried to catch his eyes but couldn’t, "I just wanted you to have a chance to be happy."
He shot Sherlock another glance. It was very hard to know what he was thinking.

"Happy," he said, eyebrows furrowed.

"You asked me to give you space, and I did. I tried the very best I could to respect your wish.”

Sherlock then turned, looked him straight in the eye. John could feel his own pulse in his throat.

"That was... I thought it was because-” He looked lost, John thought, lost and young. "But it was for me?"

"Yeah,” John said, then he actually felt it got too much for him to handle. Maybe he shouldn’t, but he needed a break from this, right now this second.

"Well I don’t know about you, but I could certainly use a drink. Can I get you anything?”

And John had to hold back a smile when he saw the look on Sherlock’s face. It was one of immense relief.

Waiting for a chance to give his order to the bartender, John thought that he’d rather have a root canal, anyway, any day, instead of struggling through this kind of conversation. But then it dawned on him what he had accomplished. He’d managed to tell Sherlock! This should be a cause for celebration, not agony. Now he knows!

With a strong rum drink in one hand, and some wine spritzer thing in his other for Sherlock, he made his way back to their spot. His steps felt lighter and easier, until he realized he still had one more thing to get through. Does it never end, he thought. How on earth did this get so bloody complicated?

He had to do it, though. Might as well get it all cleaned out in one swipe, and then be done with it.

John returned to see that Sherlock had been cornered by a man and a woman. He recognized them from Bart’s, remembered that Sherlock had actually told him about them, long time ago, during one of their relaxed Saturday nights at home. Yes, he remembered now, and smiled. He knew Sherlock couldn’t stand either of them.

It made for an entertaining five minutes, before the woman abruptly left with tears in her eyes. The man followed her, but not before spitting out a 'You belong in a mental institution!' to Sherlock.

Beautiful, brilliant Sherlock, who melted John’s heart when he turned to him and smiled.

"Oops,” he said.

And John remembered the last item on the list of difficult things to get through tonight.

He didn’t want to ask, he didn’t want to know. But he realized he needed to, and understood that knowing them both, this might very well be the only time they would ever talk about it. This was an important clue in understanding Sherlock. He had to ask.

"So,” he tried to keep his tone positive and light, "I’ve told you about Mary. May I ask why you and-” he actually had a very real problem in even saying the name, ”Gabriel split up?”

Sherlock had been smiling, but now, in less than a second, his expression turned serious, his eyes dark. John instantly regretted his question, cursed himself for having ruined the happy mood that
had began to bubble between them. He braced himself for what Sherlock was about to reply.

"This will probably come as a shock to you, John," he began, with a very serious expression across his face, "but it turns out some people find me a little bit difficult to live with."

At this, John broke out in a loud laugh, and Sherlock shortly followed, his eyes lighting up with sparkles.

"Why, that’s absurd! You, difficult!" said John, throwing his arms out to emphasize.

Both he and Sherlock were now laughing so hard, and John felt a great, wonderful warmth beginning to spread in his chest.

"It might have had something to do with the corpse I forgot in the bathtub—"

"What??" John kept laughing now, couldn’t stop.

"I only needed it for a quick experiment. I was trying to establish the rate of disintegration in sulfuric acid, given a certain set of circumstances. I’d had to pay the night guard at the morgue good money to get it, too, you know. Molly can be absolutely impossible sometimes. But it was a big guy, far too heavy to get up the stairs at Baker Street, and Gabe was away for the week, so I took it to Knightsbridge instead."

"Okay," said John, shaking his head.

"But then I got a case outside of London, and I had to leave in a rush. And I happened to forget I had left it there—"

"As one does," John interjected, grinning happily.

"Yes! That’s what I told him, too!" said Sherlock, clearly not picking up on the irony in John’s words. "So then he got back, and, yes, well."

"Decomposing body in the tub. A bit not good?" said John, trying so hard not to laugh, but failing when Sherlock looked at him and grinned.

"You could say that, I guess. I mean I did replace the tub, so I don’t understand what the problem was, but I guess, some people are just intransigent."

"Oh God," John panted. "You madman."

John was holding the happy gaze of Sherlock now, they were looking into each other’s eyes, neither of them averting their gaze. It felt like sunlight radiating through his veins.

In the midst of their happy laughter, John saw Greg approach. He stopped in front of them, seemed to take in the sight.

"Holmes and Watson, side by side again," he said, drunkenly but happily. "At last, the order in the universe has been restored!"

And John thought that was exactly how it felt. Sherlock was his missing piece. He hadn’t always known it, no. Had been swept off his feet at their very first meeting, but not been able to acknowledge it, not even to himself.

He had come to the realization only when he had lost him. Lost him first once, and then once again. John was thoroughly done with losing Sherlock. There would be no more of that.
He turned to look at Sherlock, as he was standing next to him, watching as Greg moved between the friends that were all there to celebrate him. It dawned on John that he, not Greg, must have been the reason for Sherlock to show up this evening - he hated social events like this. John was suddenly so overcome with emotions that he had to turn away briefly to get them under control.

"Sherlock," he began, and felt another rush of intensive affection as he met Sherlock’s ever changing eyes. "I’ve missed this so much I can’t even express it. Laughing with you. Being together with you. I’ve missed you. So very much.” He spoke softly, and then dared to put his palm on Sherlock’s jacked clad arm.

He saw Sherlock briefly closing his eyes, saw him smiling ever so faintly.

"Yes," Sherlock replied, very quietly. "Me too, John."

John decided to be brave.

"It’s getting a bit loud in here. Would you perhaps want to go somewhere else, sit down, grab a coffee?"

"Thanks John, but I actually need to leave," Sherlock said apologetically. "There’s, eh, somebody waiting for me at home."

John felt his heart stop; got an ice cold feeling in his chest. This can't be, he thought. It just couldn’t be. Had he already met someone else? Without even giving John a chance? He felt dizzy, tried to conceal his achingly raw disappointment, the pain that was shooting through him.

"Oh. Right, yeah. Sorry, I didn’t realize."

"Act normal, act normal. "So, what’s his name then, the lucky bastard?"

"Her name. It’s Sadie."

"Her? Wow, yeah, great. Well, it was really lovely to see you again Sherlock-"

"Perhaps you would like to come with me, say hello? You’ve actually already met her, once. We could take an evening stroll through Regent’s. I think you’ll like her."

"Oh. Thanks. I’m sure she’s great, but I don’t think-"

"She’s got a little bit of bad breath, though. Dental hygiene issues. We’re working on it."

"What?" John looked up in confusion.

"Sadie is a dog, John. The dog from the park. I’ve begun to borrow her, on occasions.” He smiled big. ”And I need to take her out now. Don’t want any accidents on the rug.”

John was so relieved he had a hard time to keep from sinking to the floor. Oh my god. And if he’d been intent before, it was nothing compared to how he was feeling right now. He needed to act, fast. He needed to make sure that no one else could come in between them. Not ever again.

He turned to Sherlock, saw him sniggering slightly at John’s shocked reaction.

"One day, Sherlock,” muttered John. "One day you’re seriously going to get it.”

"Is that a promise?” smiled Sherlock, and John was finally getting back in shape to deal with the force of nature that was Sherlock Holmes.
"You bet," he said, staring into Sherlock’s eyes, careful to keep his expression stern. He was insanely pleased with himself when Sherlock averted his eyes, and he saw a pink blush spreading across his cheeks.

"So, Baker Street it is, then?" said John.

"Baker Street," replied Sherlock, and John was thrilled to notice that his voice was a little shaky.
Chapter 24

Sitting next to Sherlock in the taxi, mostly in silence but a good kind of silence, had been unreal. But it was nothing compared to walking side by side through Regent’s Park. As John thought about this, he realized something.

The unreal feelings were not, as one might have expected, caused by the fact that they had been apart for so long and now were suddenly alone with each other again. No, quite the opposite. It was because it felt like no time had passed.

Walking in the darkness of the night, through the park, on the trails that he knew by heart, so close to Sherlock - it was like it was yesterday. They immediately clicked together, fell into their old ways - of talking, relating, joking, teasing, discussing. As he strode in synchronized pace with Sherlock, John thought that they could probably have been separated for decades and yet been able to pick up where they’d last left it, just like that. Still, he was very grateful for the fact that it hadn’t have to come to that.

Now and then, John was struck by a sense of wonder, and had to take a moment to mentally pinch himself. But most of the time, he simply forgot, and allowed himself to relax into the wonderful feeling of finally - hopefully, if he played his cards right - being together with Sherlock again. In whatever way or form that might turn out to be.

The killer dog, as John thought of it, was straining on it’s leash, pulling forward, while Sherlock kept talking without breathing - at least, that was how it seemed. John loved it. He loved walking next to him, listening to the brilliant stream of consciousness that was flowing from his mouth.

It was chilly, definitely more than a hint of autumn in the air, and John thought that it might begin to rain in a while. The park was practically empty, apart from the occasional fellow dog walker or random person; empty, quiet and peaceful.

Sherlock was talking about his cases and about - well, what was it, really? John thought it might be an assortment of those things that Sherlock wouldn’t normally say to anybody else; would just keep to himself unless John happened to be around to hear it.

This was not some sort of ego stroking on John’s part, no. It was just a piece of knowledge he had learned over time. Sherlock would tell him things he wouldn’t otherwise say. He knew - because Sherlock had even admitted it - that he would talk to John, talk out loud, even when he wasn’t there. Wonder how it had been during all this time apart? Had he been talking this way to what’s-his-name? For some reason, John’s gut feeling told him no.

John woke up from his thoughts to hear that Sherlock was currently on the subject of dog training.

"These people simply do not understand! A dog needs clear leadership, firm guidance, an alpha leader to show the way. In such a short amount of time, I have made progress with Sadie that they haven’t been able to do in years!"

"But,” said John carefully. "I don’t know anything about dogs, you know, but isn’t this, like a hunting dog? Isn’t it kind of unsuited to be kept as a companion dog in the city? It’s a Foxhound, isn’t it?"

"Not that word, please,” Sherlock cut in. ”Sure, yes. Sadie’s a hunting dog. But it doesn’t matter, John, see, that’s where these idiots go wrong! All living things respond in the same, predictable
way to the principles of classical and operant conditioning.”

After catching his breath, he added, ”You should know this! You have the same name as one of the founding fathers of behavioral psychology.”

”Yes, I know I do,” said John. ”But still, I would expect the hunting instincts in this dog to be too strong for it to ignore if-”

”She, John! Sadie is a ’she’, how hard can it be! It sounds really odd when you call her ’it’."

”My apologies,” John smiled. ”She.”

”I have applied those principles, and it has had a frankly marvelous effect!”

Sherlock looked so very pleased with himself, but John was only listening with one ear. He was too busy remembering what it had been like to be in bed with Sherlock that one night. He wondered what he could possibly do to maximize the chances of that happening again.

”Yes, but still,” John replied. ”Instincts are instincts, Sherlock.”

Sherlock stopped, looked at John with that high-and-mighty expression that John knew all too well.

”I’ll show you,” he said, then bent down to unhook the leash from the collar.

”No!” John hurried to say. ”Seriously, don’t! It’s almost eleven o’clock and it’s going to rain. If that dog runs off into the park-”

”Have you not heard a single word of what I’ve been telling you, John? She won’t, because she knows I am the leader and I’ve conditioned her to my commands. Watch!”

He unhooked the leash.

”…and there she goes,” John said grimly, as the dog took off like a rocket from a launchpad.

”No, no,” said Sherlock vaingloriously. ”She’ll come back when I call.”

They kept walking for a few minutes, and then John felt the first drops of icy rain hit his hair and his face.

”I believe I was promised a cup of tea after this walk,” said John. ”And it’s raining more.”

And then he stood back and watched as Sherlock called for the dog. It didn’t come. Sherlock kept calling. The dog was, not surprisingly, nowhere in sight.

Sherlock held up an index finger in a warning gesture, not meeting John’s eye when he spoke.

”Not a word, John. Not a word.”

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John felt exhausted after walking, and then running, around in the rain, trying to catch the damn thing. When it had finally appeared in sight, it had been quite difficult to actually get close enough to put it back on the leash, because the dog had seemed to think it was the funniest game ever invented.

With great effort, they had eventually managed to corner and capture it, and were now slowly
making their way back towards the end of the park. When they were back by the lake with not that much more to go, the rain suddenly turned into a violent downpour.

"Let’s wait it out under there," Sherlock called over the drenching rain, gesturing to the roofed bandstand located right nearby.

And that’s how John came to find himself standing right next to Sherlock, not an inch apart, in Regent’s Park at midnight, not able to believe his luck.

"So, that was refreshing," Sherlock said, and John chuckled.

"Guess I can skip my morning run tomorrow," he said, and Sherlock looked at him with an amused wrinkle between his brows.

"Why on earth would you be out running in the morning, anyway? Have you turned into Mycroft?"

John laughed. "Not getting any younger, Sherlock. Need to keep this old body in shape."

"You’re not that old, and your body looks more than fine to me."

John couldn’t read his expression.

"I’m glad to hear that," he smiled.

They stood in silence for a while, watched the rain ripple the surface of the lake; heard it smatter on the tin roof of the bandstand.

John was overcome with a strong desire to put his arm around Sherlock, but decided it would be too much. Still, it felt like it would be the most natural thing in the world to do.

"Sherlock. I can’t believe I’m standing here in the park with you again," he said softly. Sherlock turned his face towards him, but didn’t look up to meet his eye.

"I’ve thought about you, every single day, you know," John continued.

"Before… Before I met you," Sherlock said, quietly. "I didn’t know it was possible to miss someone so much that one could feel it physically." He was still looking down. "When you were gone, John. It was like a part of me was missing, too."

"Oh Sherlock," said John. It ached, hearing him say those words. He moved his hand, placed it carefully on Sherlock’s arm. He didn’t react.

"To me, you are—" Sherlock paused, seemed to be searching for words. "You affect me too much. I can’t block it out. That’s why I couldn’t… after the things that happened. I didn’t dare to risk it, because I thought that I would not be able to survive it if you changed your mind. I know I’m ridiculous, and I apologize for that, and I don’t expect you to understand. But I wanted to take this opportunity to explain."

"Sherlock," John said again. He squeezed his arm a bit tighter, tried frantically to create some sort of order in the myriad of thoughts and emotions whirling through him.

"You’re not ridiculous, don’t ever use that word about yourself. You’re wonderful, and brilliant, you’re the best and the wisest man I’ve ever known. And I can’t believe you don’t already know."

He paused to find the words.

"Know what?" asked Sherlock, finally meeting his eyes.
"Know that I feel exactly the same about you, of course. I always have, I think. But I realized it when it was too late, and by then, you know, I’d screwed up so badly already."

"You did? You, eh, felt that way, before?" Sherlock asked.

John smiled a little. "I said 'feel'. I never stopped. You’re the only one for me, Sherlock."

And then, there was nothing more to say, because words can only go so far.

John moved his hand, gently stroked his beautiful face, let his fingertips trace the convexity of his cheekbone and the concavity below it. He felt like this was happening in a film he was watching, like it wasn’t real.

"Sherlock," he said, his voice not quite carrying. Sherlock leaned in closer, and John felt him grabbing the sides of his jacket, holding it in a tight grip.

"John…"

"Can I kiss you?" John whispered, his heart beating in his throat.

And Sherlock bowed his head and John reached up, and there, under a tin roof in the park they both loved, their lips finally met again.

The kiss was so light at first, only lips brushing together, and John moved his hand to touch the wet curls in the nape of Sherlock’s neck. As they kissed, John felt a fire starting to pick up speed within him; he had to deliberately step back for a moment to not risk losing control and perhaps overwhelming Sherlock.

John didn’t know for how long they stood there. When he would think back on this moment, years and years later, he was never sure. All he could remember was the incredible happiness he felt at being, at long last, reunited with the person he loved.

They were kissing, and John couldn’t resist slipping in a little bit of his tongue between Sherlock’s full lips, just for a while. But that quickly got far too intense, and he had to lean back again, catch his breath, trying to regain some sort of composure. As he did, he shot a glance to the wooden floor of the bandstand, then stepped back a little to look around.

"Sherlock," he said, and was met by hazy eyes. "Where’s the dog?"

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An hour later, they shuffled up the stairs up to the flat in silence. All three of them were too frazzled, too wet, too freezing to do anything but focus on getting inside the warm flat.

"Oh god," John managed to complain as Sherlock closed the door behind them. They both toed off their wet shoes and socks, leaving them in a pile by the entrance.

"Mm." Sherlock was hanging his soaked coat up on a hanger, and then put his suit jacket on another.

John draped his Barbour jacket on a chair in the kitchen, left it there, dripping. He proceeded to get the kettle, filled it with water, and put teabags in two cups as the water came to a boil. It occurred to him that perhaps he should have asked first, but it just really felt like home to him, still, after all this time.
He heard the clicking sound from the dog’s claws against the kitchen floor, apparently it wanted something to drink, too. He looked around and found the bowl, filled it with water and put it down, got one tired wag in return.

It felt so incredibly right to be back at Baker Street. He smiled as he made his way out to the sitting room. The dog had curled up in a corner of the sofa, and Sherlock was kneeling in front of the fire place, getting a fire started.

When the fire had caught on, he got up, and John walked over to give him the tea. Standing so close, John could see the effects that all the running around in the rain had had on Sherlock.

"You’re shivering." He squinted his eyes to see better in the dusky flat. "And your lips are blue. God, Sherlock, you need to get out of those wet clothes right now."

He hadn’t meant it as any sort of innuendo, but the mood in the flat shifted significantly as Sherlock apparently had heard it differently. John watched as he put his tea cup down on the mantelpiece and took one step towards him, stopping at an arm’s length from John.

"Is that so, John?" he said, his voice huskier than before. John felt his cheeks sting.

"No, wow," he stammered out. "God, I didn’t mean it like that, I was just concerned-"

"Oh. Doctor’s orders, you mean?" Sherlock was smiling, there was a dangerous spark in his eyes now.

"Yes. Exactly." Oh dear god. John’s mouth felt dry, and his lips; he wet them briefly with his tongue.

"Well, then," said Sherlock. "As I’ve said before - only a fool argues with his doctor." And with that, he moved his hands to his shirt, and began to unbutton, staring straight into John’s eyes as he did it.

John couldn’t say anything, didn’t do anything, because to be honest, he wasn’t even capable of thinking at this point. The only thing he managed to do, was to stare at what was unraveling before him.

Sherlock was slowly undoing all of his shirt buttons, one after another. John kept looking, transfixed, at the naked chest gradually coming into his vision. Then, he noticed himself inhaling loudly.

"The tags," he said. "You’re wearing them." As he said it, tears welled up in his eyes. Memories of standing in this very room, writing that note and putting the tags into the envelope, hit him with force and he had to take a moment to find his balance again.

He had thought that all was lost, back then, but here he was now, given yet another chance. This time, he knew intuitively that nothing would go wrong. Things had been sorted; sorted properly. It had all been so complicated, back then, so difficult and uncertain. But not anymore. He smiled. It’s all good now, he thought. It’s all good.
It was burnt into John's memory, all the details of Sherlock’s beautiful body, and it felt surreal to get to see it again. The taut muscles. The smooth, pale skin. The small, light red nipples, hardened from the cold, and maybe from something else now. He felt a jolt shooting through his groin at the sight.

"Christ,” he managed to get out, on an exhale, as Sherlock let his shirt glide down along his back and then fall to the floor. Sherlock moved his long fingers to the button of his trousers, and John forced himself to wake up from his trance. He reached out his hand and put it on top of Sherlock’s, stopped him.

"We really don’t have to do this right now,” he mumbled. "You know that, right? Given all that has happened and all, perhaps it would be best to-”

Sherlock stilled.

"You don’t want to?” he asked quietly, causing John to let out a short, breathy laugh.

"Can’t think of anything I want more, honestly,” he said, his voice not really holding any real strength. "I just don’t want to rush-”

"Good,” Sherlock cut in, and John noticed through his haze that Sherlock was a bit breathless, too. "Because I happen to share that sentiment.”

And with that, Sherlock slipped his hand out from under John’s, and quickly placed it on top of it instead. Before John’s brain had caught on to what was happening, Sherlock was pushing John’s hand away from the trouser button. Downwards.

He was pushing down his hand, and suddenly, John found himself holding it flat over Sherlock’s cock. Over his decidedly hard cock, and John couldn’t stop himself from gasping at the sensation.

"Fuck,” he whispered. "Sherlock.”

Sherlock let go of John’s hand, and with a quick move, he snapped the trouser button out of it’s hole.

"Give me a hand with that zipper, will you?” He smiled, but was breathing with his mouth open now, and John could not tear his eyes away from where his hand was resting.

Feeling dizzy, John reached out his left hand to grab ahold of the fabric at the waistline of the trousers. At the same time, he shifted his right hand to get the zipper pull. Slowly, he pushed it down, his hand grazing over Sherlock’s erection as he moved, causing Sherlock to inhale and shift
his hips ever so slightly closer to John.

John was unsure of what to do next. Despite what Sherlock had said, he still had a nagging fear that this was going too fast. But standing there with Sherlock, who was already half naked in front of him, he just didn’t have it in himself to stop now. He put his hands on Sherlock’s hips, squeezed the sharp hipbones, heard himself making some sort of sound.

Without warning, Sherlock hooked his fingers into the waistband of his trousers. He paused, and when John was able to pull his eyes away from the sight and tilt his head up to meet his eyes, Sherlock pushed his trousers down, leaned down to free himself of them completely. John immediately looked down again, how could he not - and felt his breath hitch when he noticed that Sherlock had taken his pants off at the same time.

"Oh my god," was all that John could whisper.

John’s grip had been broken by Sherlock’s movement. They were just standing in front of each other, so close but not touching, and John was faintly aware that he was staring with his mouth open.

His eyes had quickly scanned over Sherlock’s entirely naked body, but now seemed to have gotten stuck on the one very prominent feature in the middle section. Sherlock was standing absolutely still, his head bowed down.

"Sherlock. Christ.” John swallowed, tried to focus his mind enough to speak coherently. "You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. You’re absolutely gorgeous.”

"You think?” said Sherlock quietly, causing John to smile a little.

"You have to know. You’re absolute perfection. My god. How are you even possible.”

He felt himself get overcome with a strange sort of emotion, in the midst of the very sharp arousal pumping through his body. He felt… humbled, somehow, reverent, almost. Grateful to the universe for finally giving him all he ever wanted.

He kept looking, staring. Sherlock’s cock was erect, perfectly proportioned to the rest of his body. The hair - trimmed short, John noticed in passing - surrounding it was black, contrasting sharply to his pale skin, and his cock was flushed red, the foreskin partially retracted.

Beautiful, John thought. He’d never considered dicks to be aesthetically pleasing, but this… even Sherlock’s cock was beautiful. The top of the head was glistening with moisture already, and John felt a sudden, very strong urge to take it in his mouth, taste it. He’d never done anything like that before, however, so maybe it would have to wait.

"May I touch you?”

"Please.”

John reached out, placed his hands on Sherlock’s upper arms. Slowly, he let them trace down, marveled at the feeling of soft skin and hard muscles. He stroked back up again, squeezed his shoulders, then moved over Sherlock’s flanks. Sherlock was standing still, with his head slightly leaned back. He was breathing faster now, and John noticed his chest moving with every breath.

"You’re too cold,” he said, the doctor in him not quite prepared to ever stop worrying about Sherlock and how he was doing.
"I was hoping you could warm me up," Sherlock smiled, and John grabbed his arms to pull him closer.

"I will do my very best," he smiled back, still breathless.

He moved one hand to the nape of Sherlock’s neck, tangled his fingers in the long curls, gently cupped his hand there. He put his other arm around his back, and tried not to show his hesitation when he was reminded of the scars there.

Sherlock finally moved, and wrapped both his arms around him. John used the hand at his neck to lower his head, and let his lips meet Sherlock’s.

As before, it started out light, tentative, but in a matter of seconds, their kisses went from soft to hard. Then it all got frantic.

It was as if the meeting of their lips, their mouths, their tongues, unleashed all of the built up desire that John had been holding back for so long, and he wondered if maybe Sherlock had the same reaction. It certainly felt like that. They were both moving together, clinging to one another like two people lost at sea, one person the other’s only hope for salvation. Maybe that was exactly what they were.

The brakes had come undone and John got frightened for a moment, because the intensity of what he was feeling was on a level he had never experienced before. It drowned out his ability to think. All of him had turned into an aching, burning desire, and Sherlock, naked in his arms, was all he could see.

"Sherlock," he moaned between the deep kisses, "God. I want you so badly, I’ve never wanted anyone as I want you, I need to have you, please Sherlock-”

He was aware, at some level, that he was rambling, but he couldn’t stop. His hands were touching everywhere they could reach on Sherlock’s body, he wanted it all, wanted it at once, couldn’t wait any longer.

"God, John, yes, yes,” Sherlock moaned in return, and that in itself was almost enough to push John over the edge.

"Bedroom,” John panted. "Come.”

He grabbed Sherlock by the hand, and led the way down the corridor past the kitchen and into Sherlock’s bedroom. He ripped away the cover and the duvet, and then gently lowered Sherlock down on the bed. He guided his head to the pillow, stroked a stray lock of hair out of his eyes and shot him a smile. He felt so happy he could cry when Sherlock returned it.

The frenzy had turned into something softer as they had made their way to the bedroom, and John slowly climbed up on top of Sherlock, straddling him but leaning over, cupped his beautiful face in both his hands and resumed the kissing.

As soon as their lips met again, the crazed heat came rushing back. It was like everything else in the world had faded out; everything except for the overwhelmingly arousing sensation of his tongue in Sherlock’s mouth, or Sherlock’s full, and impossibly soft and wet lower lip in between his, and the aching, throbbing feeling in his cock as he let it rub against Sherlock’s thigh.

Leaning over as much as he did, he occasionally felt Sherlock’s cock brushing up against his stomach, and every time it happened, Sherlock would let out the most amazing noises. It was almost too much to bear.
Sherlock had been holding onto his head, his fingers in his hair, but now he moved and squeezed his arms in between them, and John realized he was trying to unbutton his shirt. He sat up a bit to help. Sherlock impatiently pulled the shirt off him, and then let his large hands roam over John’s chest and shoulders.

"John," he said, his voice thick and different. "You were dangerous before, but now you’re lethal."

John managed to smile a bit at this and was going to say something, but was sidetracked as Sherlock placed a hand over his cock, and rubbed it through the fabric with perfect pressure.

"Oh god, oh god," he mumbled to Sherlock’s lips, kissed him without pause as Sherlock kept stroking and palming him.

"Take off your trousers," Sherlock said, and John got up to oblige. As he pulled them off, he decided to follow Sherlock’s example and get rid of the pants as well. It felt like they were well past any pretense of modesty at this point, anyway.

He got back on top of Sherlock, and thought briefly that this was quickly turning out to be his favorite position to be in with Sherlock. He had access to touch him practically everywhere, and also had a great visual of the most important parts. He combed his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, then moved them to touch those small hard nipples again. Sherlock shivered at the touch.

Sherlock had his head and shoulders raised from the bed, and quickly moved to scrunch up the pillow behind him for support against the headboard. He was staring at John, probably in the same way he had been staring at Sherlock earlier. Sherlock reached up, squeezed John’s pectorals and then moved his hands down to his stomach, then even further down, stroking firmly over his thighs.

John couldn’t be quiet at the touch, and the sight of Sherlock touching him there was overwhelming. Overwhelming in every way.


"Look at that amazing dick," Sherlock said, and then reached out a finger to slowly trace the underside of John’s erect cock, causing John to gasp.

"My god… It’s even bigger than I expected, John. No wonder you walk like that.” Sherlock smiled, and John was starting to get tired of this goddamn blushing thing.

He just wasn’t used to this, and hearing Sherlock - Sherlock! - complimenting his dick as he was sitting naked on top of him, well, that was more than enough to make his cheeks heat up.

"I want to see it flaccid next time."

John smiled. "That might be difficult to arrange, given my reactions to you."

He decided to give in to the impulse, and for the first time, allowed his hands to travel further down along Sherlock’s long, pale torso. He made a little pause at his navel, got a flashback from when he had been kissing him there, on that night a long time ago. It was unbelievable that he now got the chance to do it again.

However, this time, Sherlock was completely naked, and John realized that leaning over to kiss him there now would perhaps send signals of something else approaching. He wanted to do it, but didn’t feel quite ready for the challenge. It was so very odd to be the more inexperienced one in an
encounter like this, and John really didn’t want to disappoint Sherlock in any way.

So, instead, he just let his fingers make small circles around that soft little spot, before continuing to slide his hands further down. He indulged in the pleasure of watching Sherlock’s expression shift as he got closer to his cock. Sherlock’s breath hitched as John took it in his right hand, wrapped his fingers around it.

”John!” Sherlock stuttered out, and when John started to move his hand, Sherlock threw his head back into the pillow. He stroked him slowly, gently, and Sherlock whimpered. He smiled at Sherlock’s response, felt his own dick fill and get even harder.

It was so incredibly intimate to be allowed to touch Sherlock like this, and John decided to lay down next to him instead. He needed more body contact, and got the feeling that Sherlock probably did, too, being quite exposed in the current position. He laid down on his side, and came face to face with Sherlock, who had turned simultaneously.

Sherlock tilted his chin out for another kiss, and just like before, their lips and tongues meeting had the same effect as gasoline being poured on a fire. They were both pushing their bodies into one another, kissing, touching, moaning each other’s names, and John wasn’t even sure of exactly what he was saying at this point.

John still had Sherlock’s cock in his hand, felt it so hot and so hard. He stroked it up and down, a little faster now, and then let his thumb glide over the head, catching the pre-cum and then spreading it around his shaft. The noises it drew from Sherlock sent sharp spikes through John’s arousal, and he repeated the move, relished more of the same sounds from Sherlock.

Sherlock lifted his head a bit from the pillow, raised an eyebrow, looked curiously at him.

”You naughty, naughty man,” he said.

”What?” said John, but already suspected what was on his mind. Impossible to keep a single damn thing from Sherlock. Typical.

”You’ve done this before, haven’t you? Haven’t you, Mister I’m-not-gay?” He was smiling, but would still react with a gasp or a wince as John experimented with his hand movements.

John smiled. ”Only this,” he said. ”No big deal. And I’m not actually gay, you know.”

”Mm,” said Sherlock. ”I know. But you are clearly bise- Ah!” he drew a sharp breath as John let his hand slide down for a moment to give his testicles a quick tug. ”Bisexual,” Sherlock gasped.

”Don’t you worry about that now,” John said, and Sherlock sighed, then smiled.

”I want to hear all about it, later,” he said, and John didn’t reply. Instead, he just looked down again, marveled at what he was allowed to do with his hand, and at the reactions it elicited from Sherlock.

As John tried to move his other hand from where it was awkwardly positioned underneath him, he felt Sherlock shifting, too, and suddenly, there was a large hand gripping firmly around his own erection. His body responded on it’s own accord at this sensation, his hips bucked in against Sherlock and into his hand.

”God!” he exclaimed loudly, only to realize Sherlock had said the same word at the same time.

Sherlock immediately started to mimic the rhythm of John’s hand, never breaking their ongoing
kiss.

The feeling of Sherlock’s hand, firmly stroking him, was madly good, but he got just as turned on by the thought that it actually was Sherlock doing this to him. With him. Sherlock! Sherlock was naked in bed with him, and he was holding John’s cock in that beautiful hand of his.

John shivered and was suddenly afraid that he was going to come, right then and there, but after a moment of silently going through the twenty-seven bones of the hand, it thankfully subsided enough for him to continue. He leaned in for another kiss.

"SHIT!” John suddenly shouted out, completely startled. There was something wet and icy cold touching him right in the small of his back. He swung around and was met by something even worse - a big wet lick of a dog’s tongue right across his face.

"Ew, for fuck’s sake!” He frantically grabbing a corner of the duvet to wipe his face. Sadie was standing right next to the bed, tail wagging happily.

John tried to push the dog away, but it was useless. It made a gracile jump and was up in the bed, trying to lick Sherlock’s face. It spun around three times and then laid down right on top of their still entwined legs.

"Sadie, get down,” said Sherlock, and John was equal parts amazed and annoyed with the softness in his voice. “You can’t be here right now.”

"Sherlock! Do you usually let the dog sleep in your bed when it’s here?”

"No, of course not!” Sherlock said. John looked at him sternly.

"Only occasionally…”

John kept looking at him.

"What, John! She wasn’t used to being here! She felt lonely out there in the sitting room!”

John couldn’t help but smile, his heart filling to the brim with love and affection. So much for high-functioning sociopath, he thought.

"It’s deeply unhygienic, you know. The amount of mites and other allergens, not to mention the insane range of bacteria-”

"Oh shut up, will you,” said Sherlock, and John couldn’t help but laugh at this situation. "I’ll get her out, no worries, doc.”

John laid back and watched happily as Sherlock stood up, in all his naked glory, cock still semi erect, and coaxed the dog out from the bedroom.

"Go sleep in the sofa,” he heard Sherlock whisper to the dog. ”Good girl!”

Sherlock closed the door and leaped back into the bed with John.

"There, problem solved!” he beamed. ”Now, where were we?”

John pulled him close again, let his hand slide over that beautiful arse that he’d been trying very hard to control himself not to get too focused on. Sherlock leaned forward, resumed their kissing.

There was a scratch at the door. And there, another. It sounded like the dog was trying to dig it's
way through the door, and judging by the frantic noise, John thought it might very well succeed. He broke the kiss.

"Sherlock..?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes, and raised his head, looked at the closed door.

"Go to sleep, Sadie,” he called, pleadingly. The only result was that the dog now started to whine on top of the scratching.

Sherlock sighed, got up again, opened the door slightly. The dog barged in through the narrow crack, jumped up in the bed again, laid down with a heavy thump.

Sherlock sighed again. "It’s impossible! Maybe we could go out to the sitting room instead?"

"Not happening,” said John. He wasn’t amused anymore by this, because now he really, really, wanted to get back to the action with Sherlock. He got up from the bed, grabbed the dog’s collar.

"Down,” he said in a firm voice. The dog jumped down.

John held it by the collar and coaxed it out of the door. His experience with dogs amounted to exactly zero, but he figured the same principles should apply as for humans.

He looked the dog in the eye.

"Go lie down,” he said in his best military tone, snapping his fingers, pointing with his whole arm out towards the sitting room. To his amazement, the dog turned around and shuffled away along the corridor.

Sherlock’s mouth was gaping open.

"Why did she listen to YOU?” There was an annoyed little wrinkle on his nose.

John smiled. "Perhaps I should try that voice on you sometime..?"

Sherlock’s eyes lit up. "It wouldn’t work… but I suppose it couldn’t hurt you to try…” and then he blushed, and John thought it was so adorable he had to pull him down to lie next to him again, drew him into a kiss.

They were back on their sides, next to each other and Sherlock shifted a bit, positioned them so that their cocks randomly rubbed together as their hips swayed into each other.

John thought it was the most erotic thing he’d ever experienced; he closed his eyes to focus on the incredible sensation. His stomach was wet with pre-come, and the thought that it was from them both made him shiver. Then Sherlock reached down his hand and enclosed them both in it, and from a distant place somewhere, John could hear himself groan loudly into Sherlock’s mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you Alihahdnaid for the prompt on the dog! :)
Chapter 26

Waves of need, arousal, elation, gratitude and sorrow, all mixed together like colours in a glass of water.

It was John. It really was. Last time, this had ended so badly but that had come later. The night they’d shared, fifteen months ago, was still firmly locked in as a happy memory and he had refused to let it get tangled up with the painful aftermath. Refused.

It was an ocean during a storm, it flooded him, waves crashing and breaking over him as he was in his bed and John was next to him and Sherlock had his hand wrapped tight around them both, and John was pushing into it and it made Sherlock feel like his entire body was on fire.

It was John. It was his scent, his sweat, his saliva, his pre-ejaculate. It was the texture of his hair, the hard shinbones, the stubble on his cheeks, the gentle lips, the rough lips, the flexing muscles.

John was rocking into Sherlock’s hand and against his body. He had one hand on Sherlock’s hipbone and perhaps, if it had been possible, it would have left a burn mark there because that was how hot it felt against his skin.

He could smell John’s building arousal, and he could feel it, evident of course by the solid erection rubbing against his own, but also by the way his movements were gradually changing.

Sherlock felt it too, felt it all over and everywhere. He heard himself whimper.

"John, John, John.” He needed to say it, say his name to ground himself to the experience.

He’d said it, so many times just like that, when he was getting closer to climax, but only ever in solitude, spoken it into his pillow where he’d bury his face.

"John, John-"

But this time he could say it and get an instant reminder that it was real. Because every time he said it, John would respond.

He’d say ’Sherlock, Sherlock,’ or he’d say ’Yes!’ and now, when the tension was increasing between them, he had begun to curse more. Sherlock didn’t mind, was in fact more turned on by it, even though he usually preferred proper language.

"Fuck, Sherlock, fuck!” John said, loudly, his mouth open and touching Sherlock’s mouth, and then John shifted in the bed and he had to focus not to lose his grip around their cocks.

It was John. He was lying on top of him now, their bodies almost flat against each other but John must be supporting some of his weight somehow because it didn’t feel as heavy as it should. The shift in position severely restricted Sherlock’s ability to move his arm and hand, but he liked this, really did, so he held his hand still and they both kept pushing into it.

The rhythm of their hips, their cocks, thrusting into his hand in synchrony. The noises John made and that Sherlock found himself responding to so strongly that he sometimes was afraid he’d come.

John held himself up on his elbows, one on each side of Sherlock’s shoulders, and then he grabbed Sherlock’s face, took it between his hands; leaned down and kissed him.
John’s tongue deep in his mouth.

The weight of John’s body pressing him down into the mattress. 
His hands holding his head still. 
The tongue in his mouth, the hips thrusting against him. 
John’s breath. Shallow, rapid, hot against him.

”You drive me mad; your body, your mouth-” John breathed between two rocking motions that both sent Sherlock momentarily down into the mattress.

Sherlock thought he might have made a sound, a long vowel sort of sound, but he wasn’t sure. His mind was beginning to disconnect, in that way that usually only heroin or a strong dose of benzo caused it to. Could this be real?

John made a sound with words in it. It was real. John was apparently thinking the same thing.

”I can’t believe this is real,” he whispered; pushing, rocking, breathing against him. ”Can’t believe I get to do this with you.”

This act between two individuals. Bodily demands without any logic. Ridiculous, and so pathetically primitive. So how come it could feel so intensely profound?

It was John. He was making a sound, ‘mmm”, over and over, his breath still punctuated and fast.

His tongue. Back in Sherlock’s mouth. But now, pointed, and he was beginning to slip it in and out between Sherlock’s lips, mimicking the pace of their sliding together in Sherlock’s hand. It was just like fucking-

Was John thinking about fucking him? He must be. Would he want to do it? Most likely, since John had a high sexual drive and a fairly flexible personality.

Sherlock saw it before his mind, got so impossibly aroused by the internal image that he let out a moan, load this time.

John kept fucking his mouth with his tongue, and that, combined with his fantasies, sent the last shred of Sherlock’s control out and away through the window.

Then John stopped, raised his head, looked Sherlock in the eye.

”Oh my god,” he whispered. ”It this really happening, Sherlock? Am I really here with you and we are having sex, I’ve thought about this a million times-”

The tension was maddening now, he was pushing up, John was pushing down and their cocks slid in Sherlock's hand and it was so wet wet wet by now that no lubricant could have made it any more perfect.

”Me too,” he eventually managed to produce.

The wet sounds, the breathing in tandem.

”Sherlock,” John moaned. ”Sherlock I’m close, baby,”

Sherlock noticed the ’baby’ but was too lost in it all to even reflect upon it.

And then,
"Sherlock, can you come with me? Come with me-" and then John lifted his hips up a bit, shifted his weight to one arm, and reached down in between them, put his hand around Sherlock’s. Sherlock could feel John’s fingers, occasionally brushing against his bare skin when their hands moved.

It caused an alteration in his perception of reality.

The sounds got subdued, like someone had put a pair of earmuffs on him. *Stupid, why would anyone-*

"Yes," he had intended to say, but it was possible that no word was spoken.

*Oh!* It was building up, furiously, maddeningly. The telltale feeling in his groin, the rising tension in his body-

Sherlock was making such loud noises now but maybe John didn’t mind, he didn’t seem to mind, and now John was saying something again.

"Yeah, that’s it, give it to me, love, let it go, I want to feel it-"

and then,

"Sherlock, you’re making me come, I’m going to come-"

First sensation: John’s body getting tenser, heart rate increasing.

John, pushing into his hand, cock’s rubbing together. John, supporting his weight on his knees and one elbow, moving his freed left hand, cupping it around the back of Sherlock’s head.

Uncoordinated kisses.

*John was going to come, right now. Come in his hand. John.*

Second sensation: John’s cock swelling even bigger in his hand, filling with blood to the max.

*It’s really happening-*

And finally.

A fist grabbing his hair.

A wordless cry.

The contractions of John’s abs, the hot rush of liquid, spurting over his chest, over John’s chest, and then he felt it - he had gotten some on his face too. John’s semen was on his hand, his chest, his throat and on his chin, and if he’d reached out his tongue, he could have tasted it. And that was the knowledge that sent Sherlock over the edge.

*White blinding hot heat-*

A blank nothing, an overwhelming everything.

*Release.*

*John.*

From that far away place, he heard John gasp, then felt him running his fingertips through the semen that had collected in scattered pools on their naked bodies, felt him placing frantic breathless kisses over his face and on his lips.
Side by side. Sherlock’s leg between John’s. John’s arm around him, squeezing him tight against him.


An unquantified amount of time later, Sherlock opened his eyes to meet John’s. Noticed that the post-coital daze was slowly subsiding, being replaced by a look of increasing worry. How odd. He focused all his observational skills on John, tried to find out more.

"I-" John began. "That was amazing." John was smiling but there was something else there, Sherlock couldn’t tell what but there was definitely something a bit not good.

In fact, it was not at all good. It was something bad, lurking behind that polite smile.

As the thought came to mind, Sherlock went from happily relaxed to sharply apprehensive in no time at all. Adrenaline released into the bloodstream-

John must have changed his mind. Gone and changed his mind about this, about him, or perhaps about being with another man - changed his mind after all this time, right after what they’d just done -

This was exactly what everyone on his list had raised concerns about. Most, only as a vague hint; some, like Dr. Riyat, as a blunt question. Sherlock had argued, every time, tried to make them see that John wouldn’t do that to him. Tried to explain the kind of wonderful, unique sort of person that John really was. They had still seemed wary.

The thought that they had been right. It made his skin crawl.

"What is it?" Sherlock heard himself blurt out, far too insistent.

John looked scared now, was searching for words.

"Um-" he said. Of course he’s scared, he knows this will crush me-

No. Sherlock decided there was no way he could wait to hear this answer.

Could not stand lying there, naked in every sense of the word. Hearing John’s excuses, hearing his rejection.

Sherlock got up out of the bed. Got up so abruptly that his feet got caught in the sheets and he almost took a nose dive to the floor, but luckily, managed to free himself in time.

Fuck fuck fucking hell-

"Where are you going?"

"You need to leave."

"What?!" John said.

"This was clearly a mistake. I’m sorry. You need to leave." Sherlock had put on a robe and was standing up, facing the door and not John.

"A mistake?!" John had gotten out of the bed, was standing behind him, now he grabbed his arm,
forced him to turn around.

In John’s eyes, anger.

"What the hell is this, Sherlock, hm. You bring me back here, after a year and a half of silence, and you strip naked and we have sex and now you’re just going to throw me out! Well that’s-" John’s voice cracked, he inhaled sharply through his nostrils, "That’s really so fucked up I can’t even-"

Sherlock was facing away from him still. He hadn’t expected John to react this way. Didn’t yet know what to make of it. Perhaps he’d made an incorrect assumption. Best to wait to see what John would say next.

Problem was, he didn’t say anything else. Instead, he leaned down, grabbed the clothes scattered on the floor by the bed, put his trousers on, clutched his shirt in an angry fist.

Oh shit.

John took two steps towards the bedroom door, opened it.

Sherlock felt frozen in place. In the matter of a minute, things had turned into a disaster and he did not know how to stop it.

No, no, no, wait-"

"Perhaps you are a psychopath after all."

And then John walked out, slammed the door behind him.

His heart, beating so fast in his chest. He felt dizzy, disconnected. He sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling like the air had been punched out of him.

And then he finally woke up, was able to act. He yanked the door open and ran out in the corridor, heard the front door downstairs slam shut as he turned the corner in the sitting room.

Took the steps down in four big leaps, out through the front door, bare feet meeting wet asphalt and gravel. He could see John, he hadn’t gotten far.

"John!" he called, was so relieved to see him stop and turn around.

"Wait! I didn’t mean-"

Sherlock hurried closer, stopped at a safe distance.

John was waiting for him to say something, looked angry, upset. It was still raining, still dark.

"I don’t want you to leave."

John looked up to the sky for a moment, sighed, a heavy exhale.

"You’re killing me, do you get that? This is killing me. Sherlock, I can’t-" John was shaking his head, guarded expression, anger in his eyes still. "What the hell just happened? Why did you kick me out?"

Being asked to give reasons, logical explanations for his emotions was still the most difficult thing Sherlock knew. He realized he had to try hard, though, if he wanted to have any chance of fixing this.
"I thought you had changed your mind." And then he couldn’t stop himself from asking. "Have you?"

"What??" John was staring at him, eyebrows furrowed.

"You looked so worried and I thought that you were going to say that you’d changed your mind."

John took the last step towards him, and then his hands were on Sherlock’s arms, grabbing firmly. He made himself meet John’s eye.

"Sherlock, how could you even-" John was shaking him a little as he found his words, "How the bloody hell could you come up with such a crazy thought? Do you still not get it? There is nothing in this world that could make me change my mind about you. Nothing."

Exhilarating relief.

"Really?"

"Yes! Really!"

"But why were you looking like that, then?"

John sighed.

"Sherlock, I got worried because I hadn’t meant for things to happen like that, you know- happen this fast. Last time I rushed things, I ended up losing you, and you shut me out of your life, and got really scared that I’d screwed up again."

"I’m not-" Sherlock began, then stopped.

Goddamnit. How could it be so impossibly difficult to explain.

"I’m not the same as I was back then, John. I’ve changed. You do not have to worry about me any longer."

John smiled a little. "I’m glad to hear that, but I don’t think I could ever stop worrying about you, you know. That’s how it is, when you love somebody."

Love. He’d said he loved him.

Perhaps he’d stood there, too quiet and too still, for a bit too long, because John was taking him by the hand now, gently tugging him. He was smiling.

"Come on, love. Let’s get back inside."

Sherlock managed to return his smile. It felt so wonderfully good, smiling again, with John. Then he remembered.

"We can’t."

"We can’t?" John asked.

"I’m afraid I left the keys in the flat. The door locked behind me."

John laughed. "But that has surely never stopped you before."
"No," he felt himself smiling. "I suppose it hasn’t."

And then he got the added bonus of impressing John by picking the lock with the ink cartridge from the ball point pen that John had been carrying in his jacket pocket.

********************

They walked slowly through the sitting room, past the dog that was sound asleep, curled up in Sherlock’s chair.

"It’s not even useful as a guard dog," John complained.

"She, John. She," Sherlock sighed dramatically, and as he’d hoped, got John to smile again. Addictive, it was, this man’s smile, those blue eyes radiating sunshine in the middle of the night.

Back in the bedroom, Sherlock suddenly got a little embarrassed about taking his robe off in front of John. Somehow, it felt different from earlier that night, and he could feel John’s intensive gaze on his naked skin as he slipped out of the thin garment and threw it on the chair.

John was taking off his clothes as well, and he, too, seemed to be somewhat more affected this time. Then John came closer, put his hands on his hips.

"Come here you tosser," he smiled, then reached up to place a soft kiss on his lips.

And then, he was back in his bed, with John next to him. He let his palm rest against John’s chest, stroked over the sparse, coarse hair there. Unreal. Simply unreal.

"Sherlock," John said, and he could immediately tell that he was going to say something along the more serious lines.

"I'm so terribly sorry for what I said, earlier. It was inexcusable. I hope you know that, ehm, that that's not at all how I think about you."

Sherlock was quiet, taking in the words. It had indeed hurt badly, John using the one word that people threw in his face on an almost daily basis.

"You have to understand, Sherlock - you shutting me out again, that's sort of my biggest fear here."

"I'm sorry I did that," said Sherlock. "Both before and tonight."

"No you don't have to apologize. I, er, I think I know why you needed to. But it still gets to me sometimes, you know." John sighed, cupped his head, placed a kiss on his forehead. It felt so impossibly good being back in the bed with John's naked body, warming his. It even felt kind of good to talk about these things, because it meant he didn't have to wonder about it.

They were both silent for a while, John kept stroking his hair, and Sherlock had his arm around John's chest. John drew his breath again, got ready to say something more.

"At some point, I think we both need to try to communicate a bit better," he said. "You know, instead of trying to mind read." John’s hand on his hair, a finger absentmindedly twirling a strand.

"I know neither of us is an expert at the talking thing, but we really should try. Try to talk more like this. I don’t want stupid misunderstandings to keep coming in our way."

When Sherlock was silent - he was listening, he just didn’t know what to say - John searched for his eyes, caught them eventually.
"Do you know what I’m saying?" he asked, and when Sherlock managed to say yes, he was rewarded with another soft kiss on the lips.

"Good," said John. "Then let’s start with this. See I’ve been trying to figure it out for a while now, what you want, but I can’t. So I’ll ask you something now, okay? And all you have to do is answer truthfully."

The words were spoken so nicely, but Sherlock’s stomach still tied in knots when he heard it.

"So here it goes: Do you want me to stay the night, or would you rather have some space to yourself? Either is perfectly fine with me, by the way. I just want to do what you want me to."

Kind, considerate John. This was so easy to answer.

"To stay, of course! I want you to stay."

An image came up, from that one night, when John had woken him up to say he had to leave, and Sherlock remembered grabbing his wrist and asking him not to go, had pressed John for an answer regarding when he’d come back-

So much that had changed since then. Now, John had asked if he could stay, and there was nothing there to come in the way of that. John was free to stay, and Sherlock was, he realized, free to let himself bask in the undisturbed happiness that came from that knowledge.

"A penny for your thoughts," John said. Must have been smiling.

"I was just… it’s amazing, that you’re here. That we’re here, together," he said, feeling suddenly choked up.

"I know," said John, squeezed him tighter. "I know."

And when John had fallen asleep, Sherlock lay still for a long time, listening to John’s heartbeats reverberating through the mattress.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

In which the boys go on a proper date, and John has to deal with Sherlock and with homophobia.

At dawn, they were both not quite awake but not really asleep, either. Their bodies gravitated towards one another without conscious effort, pressed close again, torso against torso, leg between legs. Lips meeting and tongues quickly catching on. John could feel Sherlock’s body, pliant and relaxed from sleep, moving into him and reacting to his touches. John’s hand found it’s way down to Sherlock’s cock, and he thought that he was already starting to love the sensation of it filling in his fist, growing harder, bigger.

"Sherlock,” he moaned quietly when he felt a hand closing around his own. "Oh Sherlock, that feels so good.”

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John had fallen asleep again, with his face buried in Sherlock’s hair. When he woke up, Sherlock was not there. John listened for sounds from the bathroom, but when there were none, he quickly put on his pants and undershirt and made his way out in the sitting room. Empty.

A sense of panic, completely irrational but nevertheless, tore through him as memories of the night of Sherlock’s overdose came to mind. Just as he had decided to try to call him, he heard the front door open downstairs, and he realized that he could still, after all this time of not living at Baker Street, with a hundred percent accuracy recognize Sherlock’s steps in the stairs.

John suddenly felt quite uneasy, or maybe anxious was a better word. He’d always found it difficult, this particular moment, the morning after an established friendship had turned sexual. He’d experienced it a few times before, although not with someone who’d been as close a friend as Sherlock. Of course not, because there never had been one.

And even though Sherlock was in no way a stranger, it was, after all, their first interaction after the, eh, activities of last night. The moment where they had to look into each others’ eyes and make normal conversation, unprotected by the softness of the night.

Sherlock’s bedroom had been it’s own little universe, but now they were both back into the real world, with daylight and reality all too present, and were going to have to find a way to relate, once again, after a year and a half of separation. And this time, not only as friends but also as lovers.

During the short time it took for Sherlock to make his way up the stairs, John managed to worry about all kinds of things. Like, how should he greet him once he stepped inside? What would the mood between them be like? What would Sherlock be like - of this, John couldn’t even form a guess. It could go in absolutely any direction.

His thoughts were interrupted by the door to the flat opening.

”Ah. You’re up,” Sherlock looked almost startled to find John standing there. Perhaps he was
dealing with the same sense of uncertainty about how to proceed.

"I got a little bit worried when you weren’t here."

"You’ve really got to stop with this worrying business, John." Sherlock kicked off his wet shoes, they hit the bottom part of the wall with a thumping sound. "Complete waste of mental energy."

Sherlock held up a white paper bag, smiling. The bag was scrunched up and speckled wet from the rain that was still coming down hard outside.

"And speaking of energy. I got your favorite - pain au chocolates. I walked by the bakery after I’d dropped off Sadie."

John felt himself relaxing. The slightly awkward feeling he’d been having, was beginning to fade. There was really nothing much to be concerned about, he decided. They could still be, well, be what they always used to be, before. No need to put on an act.

"That was very kind of you. Although I must admit, I’ve never really cared too much for those. A bit too sweet for me, you know." He smiled.

"Then why did you always use to get them?" Sherlock had a puzzled and slightly annoyed expression in his eyes.

"Because I knew how much you liked them, of course. I must say, there seem to be a whole lot of things you still haven’t figured out. Maybe you’re not as clever as everyone thinks, hmm?"

John raised an eyebrow, and was pleased to notice how Sherlock wasn’t completely able to take this as the teasing joke that it so obviously was. John walked up to Sherlock and took the bag out of his hands. As he did, he let his hand briefly stroke over Sherlock’s arm, just to reconnect and confirm their new status.

"Tell you what. You get out of that wet coat of yours, and I’ll make the tea, alright?" John said, and Sherlock obliged.

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Somehow they ended up in bed, again. And somehow they managed to spend the better part of the Saturday there, too, with variations of the same kind of activities they had been up to before, but most of the time just lying tangled up in each other, talking.

Well, it was primarily Sherlock who was doing the talking, just like he had been last night in the park. He went on about his work, cases, people who had annoyed him. Sometimes he’d launch into long monologues of scientific reasoning; debating out loud with himself, once in a while getting his phone to cross-check some seemingly important fact.

Once again, John got the feeling that it was some sort of cork out of a bottle-effect he was witnessing - as if Sherlock had been holding back all those things, all this time. Waiting to be able to tell them to John.

When Sherlock was deeply emerged in the world of science, John only listened with half an ear. He’d fleetingly pick up on phrases such as ’standard enthalpy of formation’ or ’metastable and kinetically persistent species’ and smile, then refocus back to the amazing fact that he was allowed to trace his fingertips in circles on Sherlock’s smooth, pale chest. That he was allowed to feel this happy.
When Sherlock eventually paused for a sufficiently long moment, John took the chance to cut in.

"Do you have any plans for tonight?"

Sherlock turned to look at him quizzically. "No?"

John smiled. "Good. I’d like to take you out. Go somewhere nice."

"Take me out? Like, on a date?"

"Yeah." John felt his cheeks flush a little again, but was firmly decided not to let his awkward feelings of embarrassment come in the way in this. "Yes, a date. Given our activities over the last fifteen hours, I’m pretty sure that would be the correct terminology, if you and I went out for dinner together."

"A date," Sherlock said. Then he smiled, a smile so genuine and trusting that John had to lean forward to kiss him again. A gentle kiss, then one more, and then he couldn’t resist sneaking in just a tiny little bit of tongue in between Sherlock’s soft, soft lips. He felt Sherlock’s body immediately respond and move closer, causing John to feel another spark of arousal firing somewhere deep inside his chest.

"You do realize we’re both middle aged?" Sherlock smiled when he withdrew for a moment to look at John. "Can’t keep up like teenag- mmf…"

John silenced him with another kiss, sucked in that lower lip and let his hand slide down Sherlock’s back to firmly cup his arse. On an impulse, he slapped it once, then reveled in the gasping sound it drew from the wriggling man next to him.

In this short amount of time, they had squeezed in a rather remarkable number of encounters, and John was surprised to notice he was already beginning to feel much more comfortable, and much less self conscious, about the whole man on man thing. In fact, this time, he hardly even thought about it. Not when there were so many other, and much more fun, things to think about.

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John had eventually, and with much difficulty, managed to tear himself away from Sherlock and Baker Street, to go back to his own flat for a greatly needed shower and a fresh change of clothes.

Entering the quiet, sparsely decorated flat, it felt less like a home than it ever had before, so great was the contrast from Baker Street. He’d felt something similar many times before, only now, it didn’t become him the slightest. Didn’t make him feel down the way it used to do. Life was improving by the hour.

He had let Sherlock choose the place for the evening; a task which he had approached through meticulous research on his laptop. John had obligingly fetched it for him to use in bed after their last encounter was over with; soiled flannels properly discarded on the bathroom floor and a long snogging session properly accomplished.

They met at the restaurant, and despite John’s very best effort, he still couldn’t quite shake the awkward feelings. He really tried to ransack himself for the reason, and being absolutely honest with himself, he figured it wasn’t so much because of the gay thing, but more that it was difficult to go from hardly having seen Sherlock for such a long time, to, practically overnight, be sitting across from him at a table as his - what?

He didn’t even know how to define it. They were still just them, right? Sherlock and John, only this
time, the way it always should have been. He wondered if Sherlock felt the same.

The restaurant was very nice and so was the food, and after a glass of wine, they both seemed to relax again. It was going to take a bit of time, perhaps, to settle into this new thing, but that was alright, John thought. A small price to pay, to get to miraculously be reunited with Sherlock, after all this time and all those barriers. He stretched out his arm over the table, put his hand on top of Sherlock’s.

Sherlock immediately froze.

"John, you can’t do that, you know. People will notice.” His voice was low and controlled.

"Since when do you care about what people think?” asked John, confused. He didn’t withdraw his hand.

"I don’t, but you do. You’re not used to this, John. You don’t know what it’s like.”

John took a moment to carefully scan the people around them. To his surprise, he did actually discover that a few people, indeed, seemed to have not only noticed but also found it significant enough to lean over their tables, whisper a bit, linger a bit too long with their glances. How utterly ridiculous, John thought.

"Sherlock, I don’t give a fuck. I’m here with you and I’m so bloody proud of that, you have no idea. I’m the luckiest guy in the world - I want people to see.”

He gave Sherlock’s hand a squeeze, then let it go.

And he was, he really was. Was so very proud of being the one who got to sit there with Sherlock, this brilliant, gorgeous man that got noticed wherever he’d go. John had always loved to show off his dates, the more beautiful the better, and he sincerely thought that he’d never before been out with anyone as striking as Sherlock.

Of course he was proud.

Then, the whole gay aspect of it all, well. Yes, alright, it embarrassed him, a bit. Would take a little bit of time to get used to; to incorporate that aspect into his concept of himself. No reason to tell Sherlock about that, though. And, John figured, he might as well start practicing right away. This was central London, a melting pot of the world. What better place to begin? People here were bound to be open minded.

And then John’s resolve quickly got put to the test.

"John Watson, I’ll be damned!”

Standing in front of their table was Chris Jones, one of John’s dormmates from Med School, and a woman by his side, John assumed it was his wife. John and Chris had been fairly good friends for a long time, had been squash partners every Saturday morning for a while after uni even, but had only kept in touch through an obligatory Christmas card the last ten or so years. Just life coming in between, John had figured. He’d invited Chris to his wedding, he hadn’t been able to make it but had sent a nice note.

John got up briefly from the table, got a combined handshake and a hug, reached out his hand to the woman, and then sat down again.

"Man, it’s been forever! How’s everything?”
"Good, great," John replied. "How are things with you?"

"Oh, you know, can’t complain. Sarah’s parents are in town and they wanted to spend some time with the kids, so we took the chance to break free for a night. And what about you, is Mary here somewhere? I’m so sorry we missed your wedding!"

John’s heart had gone into overdrive, although he tried to tell himself there was no reason for that, no reason at all.

"Er, thanks, but you know - it turned out to be a bit of a mistake. I’m actually divorced now. It was for the best."

"Oh, gosh, I’m sorry to hear that.” Chris looked uncomfortable, having been forced into serious conversation all of a sudden. "But knowing you, I’m sure you already have a long queue of pretty ladies lined up!” He laughed and before John could say something, the man turned to Sherlock.

"I bet you’ve seen it too, mate! This one is bad with the ladies, always was. We used to call him Three Continents Watson, for all his conquests around the globe!"

John felt something akin to panic stirring in his chest, and worse, he could see fear in Sherlock’s eyes, too. And that was the thing that did it. He’d be damned if he was going to let Sherlock down this time around.

"And that was always a great exaggeration,” he smiled. "No, actually there is no queue, because I’ve already found someone special.”

He noticed Sherlock’s eyes take on saucer-like dimensions, otherwise he was frozen still.

Chris raised his eyebrows, a curious expression on his face, and John hurried to continue before the guy could say anything more.

He put his hand lightly back on top of Sherlock’s, just the way he had been holding it a few minutes ago. It was such a subtle move, barely noticeable, but impossible to misread regardless.

"This is Sherlock,” he said, trying his best to look and sound relaxed.

Maybe he was imagining half of it, but John really thought he could see all sorts of reactions cross Chris’ face, although it only lasted for a few seconds. John saw utter surprise, then confusion, and then, unfortunately if he was right, disgust.

Yes. There was a definite expression of disgust, which was then suppressed and schooled into a neutral one.

"Oh. How do you do?” the man said, stiffly nodding towards Sherlock but not reaching out his hand. "Eh, well, we were just on our way out…” his voice trailed off, and his wife shot them a tense smile. "Yeah,” the man then said. "Alright. Bye, John.”

John followed with his gaze as the couple left the restaurant, almost running.

He felt like a strong drink would be a welcome addition to the table right now. He exhaled, tried to breathe away some of the nervous tension from his shoulders. When he turned to look at Sherlock, he saw that he was still frozen, appearing quite worried.

"Sherlock,” he said. "Please tell me what you are thinking right now.”
"I-" said Sherlock, then went back into frozen mode.

"Sherlock, please. I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, I didn’t mean to put you in the spotlight like that. I just- I don’t want to lie, or hide. I feel I have no reason to."

"No," said Sherlock. "That was, eh. Good. But-" he grew silent again.

"But what?" John probed.

"Don’t think you have to get up on the barricades for my sake, John. I rarely find it’s worth the while, myself."

"But how can you not! Seriously Sherlock, this is crazy. We’ve only been out for two hours, and already there are people having a problem with us just sitting here, together! Even though we are doing absolutely nothing offensive! I’m not even allowed to hold your bloody hand, for Christ’s sake! I won’t have it, you know."

He noticed himself talking rather loudly now, emphasizing it all with a frustrated, flailing arm gesture.

Sherlock’s serious expression suddenly shifted, and instead, he smiled briefly, put his hand over his mouth.

"What?" asked John.

"From the way you sound, John… Might I expect to catch a glimpse of you in the Pride parade next summer?" He snickered and simultaneously tried to swallow the wine that he had just taken a sip of.

John’s cheeks heated up, again. Oh it was getting bloody tiresome, that.

"If this shit keeps up - yeah, you just might!" And then he got a mental image of himself, dressed in nothing but a pair of golden swim trunks, dancing on a float, and he had to laugh.

"What’s so funny?" asked Sherlock.

"Oh, nothing, love," John smiled, then took another bite of his excellent steak. "I’m just very happy to be sitting here with you."

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They eventually found their way back to normal, and spent another lovely hour finishing their wine and ordering some espresso. Sherlock was leaned back in his seat, and John had ceased the opportunity to press his own leg tight against Sherlock’s underneath the table. Just as he considered toeing off his shoe to place his foot somewhere else, Sherlock’s phone chimed. He took it up and read the text.

"Lestrade wants me to come in to the station tomorrow at noon. They’re bringing in the suspect in the Brixton murders for the first round of questioning, and he’s asking me to listen in. Sneaky one, that killer. Got a waterproof alibi but he’s guilty, I know it."

Sherlock had been talking while looking at the screen, but then abruptly looked up at John, eyes shining with excitement.

"Want to come with me?"
John felt the almost conditioned response of adrenaline and anticipation come over him. It had been so long, and he had missed it so much. But real life had other plans for him, and it pained him to have to turn Sherlock down.

"I would really have loved to, Sherlock, but I have Anna tomorrow. I’m picking her up at nine in the morning."

"Oh." Sherlock furrowed his eyebrows. He looked taken aback, as if this was something he had not at all expected. "Can’t you do that some other time?"

"No, I don’t think I can. Mary needed to go somewhere I believe.” And then he felt he had to be clearer. "And also, of course, I want to see my daughter. I haven’t seen her for a week now."

"Right,” said Sherlock, then grew quiet, looked down again. "Guess I’ll go by myself then,” he mumbled towards the phone, and John thought there was a touch of anger in those words.

Walking out of the restaurant, the mood between them had shifted, and John wasn’t sure how to turn it around again. Sherlock had stopped talking, seemed to have withdrawn back into his shell and would only reply monosyllabically to John’s attempts at conversation.

Out on the sidewalk, they got stuck for a moment, neither of them seemed to know what to say.

"I assume you’d better head back to your place then, early morning tomorrow and all,” Sherlock said, not meeting John’s eye. It was impossible to know what he was really thinking. John felt at a loss at this sudden shift, and the nervous, fluttery feeling in his stomach was back. He was not used to Sherlock acting this way towards him, but then again, before, there hadn’t been any other people or obligations to come between them before.

John decided to try the direct approach.

"Sherlock.” He touched his arm, tried to make Sherlock look at him. "I’m sorry that I’m not able to come with you tomorrow. You know I want to, right. I just can’t, not this time. Don’t punish me for that, please.”

Sherlock sighed, was quiet for while. Then he finally looked up to meet his eye.

"This can never be like before, can it,” he said, but it wasn’t a question. He looked very sad, and John felt himself sinking even further.

"Sherlock, please,” he said, scrambling for the right things to say. "Things may be different, but I promise you, it’s not the end of the world. In fact, I’m very happy I have my daughter, and I think, with a little bit of time, you might come to like her, too."

"I’m not good with children, John,” Sherlock mumbled, grumpily. "I don’t like them at all, to be honest. They’re strange and loud and unpredictable. They lack a fundamental regard for behavioral norms and proper conduct. They’re exhaustingly nosy and overly curious and just, oh, I don’t know. Obnoxious, I guess that word sums it up.”

John chuckled.

"What?” Sherlock said, a bit annoyed. "Why are you laughing?”

"Oh, it’s just - you just described yourself.” John bit his lip, waited for the reaction.

"I did not!” Sherlock scoffed.
"Did too," John said teasingly.

"Did not!" Sherlock almost yelled, but John saw a newly lit sparkle in his eyes.

John stepped in closer, and there, right on the sidewalk, in the midst of all the people and taxis and traffic noise, he put his arms around Sherlock and pulled him in close. With his hand, he tilted Sherlock’s head down and then waited for permission. When he saw it in his eyes, he kissed him.

He felt Sherlock’s body move in closer against his own, felt the heat and the tension rising between them. Noticed Sherlock’s respiration quicken and become more shallow, as he kept on kissing him, slow and wantingly.

"A bit strange and unpredictable, you can’t deny it," John whispered teasingly against Sherlock’s lips.

"Hmf," Sherlock grunted, and John kissed him again.

"And you’re not exactly a poster boy for norms and proper conduct, now are you, love," John kept on.

Another kiss. Sherlock leaned in closer.

"And definitely a bit obnoxious from time to time," John leaned in very close and on the next kiss, he let his tongue touch Sherlock’s for the briefest of moment.

"John," Sherlock whispered breathlessly, pressing his groin against him. "Let’s go home."
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Sherlock shows John what he's got.

They both tried to pull apart, but it was difficult, so very difficult to let go. Then, a rough voice, shouting from a fairly short distance, startled them both.

"OI! FAGGOTS!" Loud laughter coming from the same direction.

John glanced up quickly and saw that it was a small group of men, in their twenties, approaching. Drunk, rowdy, denim jackets and combat boots, beer bottles in their hands.

He had pulled away from Sherlock, and now felt a massive wave of adrenaline shooting through his body.

"Want to suck my dick too while you're at it!" a stocky young man in the middle of the group shouted, making an obscene gesture seemingly directed at Sherlock who happened to be positioned so that he was facing them straight on. The comment drew more laughter from the guy's friends. People on the sidewalk around them were looking away, hurrying to not getting involved, it seemed.

John turned to the men, took a step closer.

"John, don’t." Sherlock said in a low voice. "Ignore them. It’s not worth it."

"Sorry, love, I can’t do that," John replied without looking back at Sherlock. He felt his heart beating in his throat now. Sherlock sighed behind him.

“Alright, game on then,” he heard Sherlock say, and then, Sherlock’s rumbling voice calling back to the man.

“Sorry, I’ve a better deal right here,” Sherlock hollered back to the man. “But since you're so keen, why don't you head back to the club you visited just last night? Might want to tell your friends that's the reason you left that birthday party so early. I'm sure they'd love to hear all about the escort guy you hooked up with, too.”

John had time to notice the friends turning in slight shock towards the guy, but not for long since the guy then hurled himself straight towards Sherlock.

Sherlock, of course, ducked down with perfect timing, allowing John to block the attack and then knock the guy to the ground with a tightly controlled fist. The three friends who came running against them turned out to be just as easy to fend off, and it was over as quickly as it had begun.

But when the young men had dragged themselves and their friend away, John noticed that Sherlock’s nose was bleeding.

“God, Sherlock, what happened? I didn't see you get hit.” John felt terribly bad for having started it, especially since Sherlock had asked him not to. Still, he couldn't see how he could possibly have
let them get away with their offensive behaviour.

“I didn't. But the tall one sort of fell on me,” he said, tilting his head back and pressing his thumb and index finger against his nose.

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“I had no idea, Sherlock,” John said softly when they were seated in a taxi and headed towards Baker Street again. Sherlock's nose had stopped bleeding, but he still held his head slightly leaned back against the backrest. “How do you put up with all this?”

Sherlock was silent for a while before he spoke.

“I guess you just have to learn to choose your battles, John. They're idiots. I've learned a long time ago not to let them get to me.” He turned to John, and John was happy to feel Sherlock's hand brush against his knee.

He let his own hand, at first hesitantly, touch Sherlock's thigh, then let it rest there more decisively. Sherlock flexed the muscle and then looked at John, and smiled. Encouraged, John let his hand travel to the inside of his leg, then made his way up, until he was only an inch away from his crotch.

Sherlock sighed very quietly, and then glided down a bit in his seat, trying to make John's hand make contact. When it didn't work – John knew better than to appease his partner's needs right away – Sherlock squirmed and moved about frustratedly.

John leaned in towards his ear. “Eager, are we?” he whispered, and felt himself getting more turned on by just the thought of what might be awaiting when they got back to Baker Street.

“Yes...” Sherlock whispered back. “Yes, John... you have no idea. No idea of the things I want to do to you tonight.”

John felt arousal shoot sharply through him at hearing those words, whispered so quietly into his ear. He could feel Sherlock's hot breath on the thin skin of his ear, and it didn't exactly lessen when Sherlock unexpectedly bit his earlobe, quite hard.

"John," Sherlock said breathlessly, having pulled away a few inches from John’s face. John looked at him and was met by heavy eyelids and hazy blue green eyes. ”John, have you figured out yet what I would like to do?”

Sherlock was mimicking John's motions now, brushing over John’s thigh with his hand, getting dangerously close to his dick on the upstrokes.

John thought he had a pretty good guess regarding what Sherlock had in mind, but could barely believe his luck if he was right. In any case, he was too embarrassed to say it.

”No, what would you like to do?” he panted, still careful to keep his voice level down to a whisper.

Sherlock looked at him with a distant expression in his eyes. Arousal, John thought. Heavy arousal. It took him all the self control that he had in him not to just throw himself over Sherlock right there in the taxi; shove his tongue down his throat.

”I’ll tell you,” Sherlock whispered, so very quietly, into his ear. “I would like to suck that big dick of yours, John. Suck it until you come.”
"Sweet Jesus." John’s voice was trembling at this point, despite the low volume. "Oh Sherlock. Oh fuck."

"Yes…” Sherlock whispered, then leaned back a bit to stare at John with crazy intensive, wild eyes.

"…we can do that too, but not tonight.” He let out a short, breathy laugh and John felt the furious arousal building up even stronger within him.

"So, will you let me? Will you let me take you into my mouth? I’m rather good at it, you know.” John gasped, let out a single puff of soundless laughter. "I wouldn’t expect you to be anything less than brilliant.”

"Can I take that as a yes, then?” Sherlock had moved his hand up that final inch, and was now palming John as he spoke.

"Yes,” John managed to say. His head felt light. "Oh my god. Yes, please.”

Sherlock gave him a few decisive, hard squeezes with his hand, and John let his head fall back against the backrest of the taxi. Unreal. Simply unreal.

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"Sit up a bit for me, John,” demanded Sherlock, and John turned from his side to his back and scooted up along the bed until he was half sitting against the headboard, a large pillow behind his back and head.

Sherlock was beginning to make his way down alongside John’s chest, kissing it here and there as he moved. He was still lying on his side next to John, and eventually he had moved so far down that his head was level with John’s crotch.

John could feel Sherlock’s hot breath on his skin, as Sherlock raised himself on one elbow and sort of hovered over him, staring at his cock. John thought that he should probably feel a bit embarrassed or self-conscious at this thorough examination, but all he could think about right now was what it would be like to be inside Sherlock’s mouth.

He placed a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, moved it in large circles over the soft skin. Sherlock let his right hand roam over John’s thighs, momentarily coming up to make a fist around his cock, stroked once or twice, then kept moving over his hipbones, his stomach, his arse.

"John,” he mumbled from down there, "John… do you have any idea of how much you turn me on…?”

It didn’t seem like he expected an answer, so John just hummed a bit, feeling dizzy. Then he couldn’t hold back a low moan, as Sherlock started to stroke him and simultaneously leaned over John’s leg to let his open mouth skim John’s balls in the lightest of touch, then surprising John by nipping at the delicate skin there with his lips.

Sherlock sat up more. He moved both his palms over the insides of John’s thighs, hard and decisive.

"Move,” he said, pressing at John’s thighs.

John bent his knees slightly and let his legs fall apart, and Sherlock made an appreciative noise.
His hand was back on John’s cock again, and he moved his left hand to cup his balls, weighed them in his hand as he kept stroking, now with a twisting motion at the top which made John groan.

Sherlock had at some point managed to produce out of nowhere a bottle of lube, and the slippery noises from his hand stroking John's dick was almost too much in itself.

It was amazing, simply amazing, the way Sherlock moved his hands, and John let his head fall back into the pillow for a moment, just enjoying the sensation.

Abruptly, Sherlock let go of his cock and sat up on the bed, kicked around to untangle the duvet from his feet. John raised his head further up to see what was going on, and saw Sherlock rummaging around in the drawer of his bedside table.

He got back, but this time, instead of lying down on his side again, he sat up on his knees, positioned himself between John’s legs. He had a silvery foil packet pinched between his right index and middle finger, held it up to John, raised an eyebrow.

Then, Sherlock quickly opened it and rolled the condom onto John with a swift motion using both his hands.

John had briefly thought about this just a moment earlier, but then, in his strong excitement, decided that the risks were so vanishingly slim. Sherlock would never expose him to danger, and he knew he was clean himself. But now, he felt very grateful that one of them had had the courage and presence to think straight.

“Good boy,” he breathed as Sherlock was just finished with the condom.

He was surprised by Sherlock actually groaning, loudly, at this. Sherlock had laid down on his stomach, and was just in the process of making himself comfortable between John's naked thighs.

“Say that again please,” Sherlock breathed, heavily, his eyes lidded and hazy. “I want you to say that again, if you're amenable.”

Always one to want to please his lovers, John smiled. He’d seen the response his words had triggered in Sherlock. He understood what he was after, and he wasn’t really surprised by it either, no, he had already sort of figured out that that kind of stuff would probably be a turn on for Sherlock. John did not plan to disappoint.

“You're amazing,” he breathed. “So beautiful. Now, be my good boy and suck that dick, will you, love,” he said, and the reaction it drew from Sherlock was frankly amazing to watch.

”John,” Sherlock moaned, his voice sounding almost pained. John had raised himself up more, he was leaning on his elbows, because he sure as hell wasn’t going to miss a single thing of this miracle.

Sherlock’s face was hovering just over John’s erection, sending shivers through his body as Sherlock breathed hot air over him. His hands were back on the inside of John’s thighs, squeezing and caressing, and John tried hard to not start to move his hips in anticipation.

”Be a good boy,” he whispered again.

When he saw Sherlock opening his mouth and closing the last inch of distance between them, he almost felt like he was going to pass out. Then, the intense heat as Sherlock took the head of his cock into his mouth.
"Fuck!" John couldn’t hold back, he moaned loudly. "Fuck, baby, fuck, fuck, oh fuck-"

He felt Sherlock blow a hot puff of air through his nostrils, causing his pubic hair just above his cock to move. John’s hands had instinctively made their way to Sherlock’s head, and oh dear lord how he had fantasized about this. Dreamt of running his fingers through Sherlock’s soft, dark hair, while he was doing this, exactly this. Only it was a million times better in real life.

And then, another of John’s fantasies came to life, as Sherlock actually tilted his head up to look John in the eye, as he slowly took more of John into his mouth. John could see hazy eyes under long, dark eyelashes, and he just could not be quiet. No chance.

His cock was inside Sherlock’s mouth, and their eyes locked for a moment, and through his dizziness, John managed to think that he would remember that image forever.

Sherlock started to bob his head up and down, his lips sliding tight along John’s cock, and John felt his hips moving ever so slightly even though he tried his best to be still.

"God Sherlock, god, I’m in your mouth, oh fuck it feels so good baby,” he rambled on, not bothering to censor his words anymore. It was absolutely unbelievable. He was lying naked on his back, getting a blow job from Sherlock Holmes. Unreal.

His entire body shook when he felt Sherlock add first a swirling tongue around the head, and then a firm hand at the base.

Sherlock stopped the up and down motion and for a moment, he just held the top of his dick in his mouth. Their eyes met again, John shivered, then yelped out loud again as Sherlock let his pointed tongue start to flicker over the frenulum.

Then, Sherlock slowly moved, released John’s cock, but kept his mouth so impossibly close to it still. It felt cold and frustrating, but John guessed it was for some kind of reason. He was right.

"Do you know which particular skill makes me so good at this, John?” Sherlock asked, while looking up at him through those long lashes.

"Everything,” he managed to get out. "Everything you do is amazing, it feels so incredibly good, god, every single thing you do to me-” he panted.

Sherlock was half sitting in between his thighs now.

"Good,” whispered Sherlock. "But when I said I was rather good, I was referring to something specific. Can you guess, John?” And then he actually bent down to lick the entire length of John’s dick, as he, apparently, waited in John’s reply.

Oh dear lord. How am I supposed to survive this? John wondered to himself.

"No,” he croaked.

"Then why don’t you ask me,” Sherlock smiled teasingly.

John heard himself swallow, audibly. "What is it that makes you so good at this?” he whispered.

"Why, I’m so glad you asked. It is the fact that I have full control over my pharyngeal reflex. That’s what.” Sherlock had his eyes locked on John, and John felt like he might faint for real this time. Or die from arousal.
John happened to say out loud the first thing that came to his mind, because to be honest, at this point he was not really fit for conversation.

"Like in the porn flicks," he gasped, then wondering why he’d said that, realizing that perhaps Sherlock, being Sherlock, had never watched porn. He needn’t have worried.


"Oh dear god, you’ll be the end of me."

Sherlock smiled, a wicked smile.

"Stand up on your knees, John." John obliged, got up to stand on shaky knees while Sherlock positioned himself in front of him. He put both of his large hands on John’s hipbones, and then stretched out his tongue. He let it swirl around John’s cock, and John could see everything from this new angle. He cursed again.

"Fuck, fuck, oh Sherlock, oh-"

Sherlock pulled away again, but still had his hands on John’s hips. He looked up again, those dark eyes meeting John’s.

"John," he said. "Watch."

In one continuous motion, he took John’s cock into his mouth, leaned forward, exhaled through his nose. But around the point where John’s previous partners would stop and pull back, sometimes with a gag or a choking sound, Sherlock just kept going.

He took it all in, just like that, and John heard himself making some kind of primitive sound at the intense feeling and the mind-blowingly hot visual of seeing his dick disappear completely down Sherlock’s mouth.

John got a mental image of what it would be like if he, some day, didn’t wear a condom and got to come in this position. How his cum would shoot right down Sherlock’s throat.

He felt his body reacting intensely to all this, and felt dangerously close to coming. Somehow, Sherlock understood and pulled off quickly, then pressed his hand hard around the base of John’s cock, delaying the inevitable for at least a little while longer.

Sherlock gasped for air as he did so, and John suddenly felt bad for him. He really was more for giving than receiving in bed, but this.. this was just too damn good to pass up on, and after all, Sherlock seemed to like it.

Then, Sherlock repeated the amazing thing that he’d just done, again and again, and John just couldn’t stop staring.

Their eyes met, and John saw intense arousal in Sherlock’s eyes. He tried to reach forward to grab his cock.

Sherlock shook his head, still with John’s dick in his mouth. He returned to sucking it the way he had been doing in the beginning, then encouraged John to move his hips, held his head still and let John set the pace, let him fuck into his mouth. John felt his knees buckle, and had to lean back against the headboard for support.

From a distant place, John heard himself groan.
Eventually, Sherlock grabbed the back of John's thighs in a firm grip and pulled, causing John to fall back down onto the bed, lying down on his back with a pillow under his head. He was getting so very close now, and Sherlock took over again, sucked him hard with a steady pace, one hand around the base of his cock, the other gently holding his balls.

And that was it.

“God, I'm coming, baby—”

His entire body quivered violently as he came, and Sherlock sucked him through it, did not let go until John put a hand on his face to signal it was getting too much. He felt as if he was going to pass out; completely spent after having been treated to the best fucking blow job he'd ever experienced.

John had let his head fall back into the pillow, closed his eyes as he was trying to catch his breath and regain some sort of consciousness. He was drawn out of his coma-like state by Sherlock, still on his knees in between John's legs, but now leaning forward, his upper body hovering over John's. He had that distant, hazy look in his eyes and he was holding his own cock, stroking it desperately.

“John, John,” he chanted, leaning his sweaty forehead against John’s, and John quickly came to it. He reached down both his hands, pushed away Sherlock's with a firm motion.

“Let me do that for you, love,” he breathed, and Sherlock didn't protest.

“Won't take long,” he panted, and John thought that seeing Sherlock undone like this was hotter than anything he'd been able to imagine.

“Harder, John, faster,” he demanded and John adjusted his grip and pace, and then remembered.

“So brilliant, so beautiful,” he said, not breaking the quick rhythm. “You were such a good boy, it was amazing, so perfect,” and then it took just five more strokes until Sherlock was shutting his eyes and coming, hard, all over John's hand and chest, burying his nails into John’s shoulders.

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When John got back from the bathroom after having cleaned himself up and brushed his teeth with the toothbrush he had remembered to bring from his flat, Sherlock was lying on his side with his eyes closed, the duvet pulled all the way up to his chin.

John got into the bed and laid down next to him.

“Are you asleep?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Sherlock mumbled. John got in close and put his arm around him, stroked gently over his hair, still moist from the shower he'd taken afterwards.

John was overcome with a very strong impulse to tell him that he loved him. He felt it, felt it so impossibly strong, but knew those words could elicit all sorts of complicated reactions – you just never knew. And with someone like Sherlock, there was really no way to tell. He decided to show some self restraint and wait a bit with that particular declaration.

“You're wonderful,” he said instead. “I’m the luckiest man alive.”

He felt Sherlock snuggle in even closer, and John embraced him and squeezed him tight, closed his eyes. He'd sleep well tonight, he could feel it. Tonight, there would be no nightmares, no waking
up to panic attacks. This is happiness, he thought hazily. He hadn't felt it for so long he'd almost forgotten what it was like.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Dear friends, here are the final four chapters, and a brief epilogue. How will it all end?

:)  
Sherlock doesn't want John's daughter at Baker Street, and he's jealous of the time John spends with her.  
John refuses to quit his job at the hospital.  
Are there perhaps certain things in the bedroom that simply makes John feel 'too gay'?  
And who's the unexpected visitor at the door of 221B Baker Street on Christmas Eve..?

There will be angst, hardcore fluff and ditto porn. Not necessarily in that order.

It had been almost three months since John had become his. It was late November and it had been raining for days on end. Sherlock was sitting in the window ledge, smoking, and he didn’t have it in him to care about what John would say about it when he noticed the smell.

It wasn’t the first time the thought had occurred to Sherlock, but it was without doubt the most serious one, so far. The thought that maybe John would have had enough, this time. Enough of Sherlock. That he would leave.

The evening had started out fine enough, but then there had been the text from Mary, and more cancelled plans, more retracted promises; and then of course more of the same goddamn excuses and pale apologies.

Nothing of which could make up for the fact that John had once again put his daughter’s needs over Sherlock’s, and the worst part of it all was that Sherlock, somewhere deep down although he refused to admit it, knew that John was correct in doing so. It was right, and all John said was right, and Sherlock was wrong.

Wrong and needy and selfish and childish and although John would never, never, say that in so many words, Sherlock knew that was what he was thinking. He'd been standing in front of Sherlock, who'd been curled up on the sofa with his back angrily turned to John, determined to not say another word about it all.

But of course he could never shut up, no, not when John would first try to plea with him, coax him, but then become angry, his voice tenser, his breathing more controlled. And as expected, John had used his trump card.

"You know, Sherlock, if I could just bring Anna here and know that you’d be okay with that, then we could still be together this weekend,” he'd said, and Sherlock had felt like punching his fist into something.

And then John had gone on some sort of rant about this, and for every self-righteous argument he threw in Sherlock’s direction, Sherlock got more desperate because he had nothing to use back, no valid counter arguments, nothing to defend his stance. All he had, was that overwhelmingly strong
feeling in his gut that he did not want that child here, but that, unfortunately, was not good enough for John to accept.

He'd swung around in the sofa, the anger inside so strong that he wasn’t really thinking straight, and maybe that was why he'd said the things he did, and then watched John go pale, just a little bit but still.

"I'm going to take a walk." John had grabbed his jacket, so very careful not to slam the door behind him, and that made Sherlock crazy too, because it was as if John wanted to show him that he wasn’t the ridiculous, out-of-control, moody person that Sherlock was.

It had happened a few times already, this kind of fight. In fact, it had happened far more often than Sherlock would have wished, given that they’d only been together for such a short amount of time.

Fights about the inordinate amount of time that John would spend with that child. Fights about John’s stupid job, which almost always tied into the fact that he wasn’t able to come with Sherlock on cases in the way he should. Yes, should. John had gotten angry with him for saying so, but really, it was how it was meant to be, and Sherlock just couldn’t fathom why John was suddenly resisting so many of those things that had used to make them them.

Maybe he didn’t want to be with Sherlock like that, anymore. Maybe he, too, would eventually try to turn Sherlock into some bland vanilla version of himself. Who knew, perhaps he would come home one day and line up a job offer and adoption papers and bloody hell. Maybe no one could stand sharing their life with someone like Sherlock.

When John had left the flat, Sherlock felt like crying, regret and anxiety coming creeping into his skin like it always did. He intensely wished John would change his mind, come back home. Wrap his arms around Sherlock and kiss him and say that he was sorry, and tell him that he loved him and all those nice things he usually did.

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Three hours later, John returned, smelling of beer and the pub five blocks away, and it was the longest time he'd been away after a fight like this. Sherlock had been playing the violin, trying to keep himself distracted from the panicky feelings that were tugging inside, but now he abruptly put the violin down and walked up to John, took his jacket, put it back on the hook.

"Sherlock-" John began, but Sherlock didn’t want to talk. No point in talking, anyway, since he had nothing to offer that could make it better. Without a word, he dropped down to his knees in front of John, one quick hand opening his zipper, the other swiftly trying to get John’s flaccid dick out of his jeans.

"Don’t," John said, took a small step back, grabbed his hand and removed it from his crotch.

Hot humiliation rushed over him, burning his cheeks, stinging in his chest. John had never turned him down before, and having it happen like this, when all he wanted was to reach out to John and make everything better again and show him that he was sorry, really was, so very sorry for all of his shortcomings, for his failure to behave like the normal person that John deserved-

He had wanted to show him that he loved him, endlessly, even if that wasn’t always how it came across in his actions. Still, that was how it was. He loved John so much he knew he couldn’t stand to be without him, no, never again, and it scared him and it felt unfair. It was like he was being blackmailed by his own emotions.
The shame was too strong. Sherlock got up on his feet and without looking at John, walked back to his bedroom, closed the door, flopped down on the bed, buried his face in the pillow. Tears were stinging behind his eyelids.

A gentle knock on the door. He didn’t say anything. The door was opened.

"Sherlock," John said, sighing.

Sherlock was not looking up, but he felt the mattress move as John sat down on the edge.

"Have you decided to leave?" Sherlock mumbled.

"What- no!" John said. "Of course not. But-"

"But what?" Sherlock raised his head to look at John. They’d had similar exchanges before, but never had there been a ‘but’ in there. A condition. A threat.

"We need to figure out a way to deal with this situation," John said. "It’s getting out of hand."

"You mean that I need to compromise to fix your problem," Sherlock blurted out and then regretted it. The last thing he wanted to do now was to send John away again.

"I’m sorry," he reluctantly added. But he really wasn’t. If anything, he was mad. Why did John have to go make himself a baby, so completely idiotic. It had ruined so much of what they’d had, and what they now could have together. Hell, why did John have to go put his dick into that woman in the first place. He felt sick just thinking about it.

"I want to be with you," John said softly. "I want to be with you every single second that I can. I think about you constantly when we’re apart, you know. I love you, Sherlock, you know I do."

John was stroking his back.

"Then why won’t you move back in?"

John sighed again, removed his hand from his back.

"Do you really have to ask? You know very well why I can’t."

"Why can’t she just always stay with Mary, she’s practically there almost all the time anyway. You could just go there to see her. Lots of people have similar arrangements, you know, and their children seem to be doing just fine!"

"Sherlock-" John paused. "Let’s not go there again, please. Let’s try to talk about this constructively."

But what could he say? He didn’t know, so he kept quiet.

Eventually, John got up from the bed, went into the bathroom. Sherlock could hear him brush his teeth, then getting into the shower.

John got back into bed, and Sherlock felt the by now automatic, anticipative tingling response to John’s scent, to John’s body so close to his. But this time, John didn’t put his arms around him, and Sherlock didn’t move.

They’d had sex very close to every night that John had spent at Baker Street. There had only been a handful of exceptions, and only because Sherlock had been in the most intensive phase of a case, and had been up working and forgetting the time, and then being startled by John coming into the
kitchen for a quick cup of tea before going to work because apparently, it was already morning.

Usually, just lying down next to each other would mean them both getting instantly turned on. Tonight was no exception, Sherlock felt it and he noticed that John did, too. But John didn’t reach out to him tonight, and after being rejected earlier, Sherlock certainly wasn’t going to risk it once more.

He spent the entire night awake, his laptop eventually getting so hot it made the skin on his thighs turn red.

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In the morning, he made breakfast while John got dressed for another day at the madhouse that was the Trauma Unit. Since John had gotten promoted, more and more of his time there had been spent dealing with all sorts of administrative tasks; conferences and meetings and paperwork, and Sherlock knew he wasn’t happy about that, not one bit.

They couldn’t talk about it, though, because every time John brought it up, Sherlock couldn’t resist making a point about how John should just quit, really he should. And then John got angry and they fought about it, and John rambled on about how the money was good (which was true, incidentally. They swam in money now, in a way that they had never, before) and how he needed to have a meaningful occupation, and blah blah blah.

"Sherlock,” said John as they were seated across from each other in silence, drinking their tea. ”I have decided something, and it’s not open for discussion.”

Sherlock’s heart jumped.

"This Saturday, I am going to get Anna at ten o’clock, just like I said. And you are going to get dressed, and then you are going to come meet up with me. And then, we are all going to the Butterfly exhibit at the National History Museum, and we are going to have a nice lunch there afterwards. And if you do all that, without bitching and complaining about it until my ears fall off, I’ll take Anna back to Mary in the evening, and we can go out for dinner as we had planned. And that’s how it’s going to be.”

Seemingly to prove his point that this was not up for debate, John then immediately got up to get his jacket and his keys.

"I have a double shift, so I’ll see you in the morning. Try not to set the flat on fire while I’m gone,” John said and nodded towards the burner Sherlock had gotten out in preparation of the experiment he was planning to start later on.

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"It’s called the proboscis,” Sherlock explained, and felt really pleased - surprised but pleased - that the group of children that had gathered around him actually seemed to have functioning listening capabilities. "It works like a drinking straw of sorts. When the butterfly first emerge from the chrysalis, the proboscis is, actually, in two parts. So the first thing it has to do, is to assemble it into one working mouthpiece.”

"Do they only drink nectar?” a little girl, eight or nine years old, asked.

"Mostly, but not exclusively,” he replied. "Nectar is primarily sugar, and as you know, you need other nutrients, too. Minerals, iron. That’s why one can sometimes observe a butterfly drink from a mud puddle, as well. It’s called puddling. The male butterflies do that more than the female ones,
because the males need to incorporate the minerals from the mud into their sperm.”

He noticed puzzled expressions on the kids’ faces.

”Ah,” he said. ”Does anyone know what sperm is?”

”This is all so very interesting!” a blushing but cheerful blonde woman in her thirties, most certainly the children’s teacher, interrupted. ”You must be a professor here,” she smiled. ”It’s so kind of you to take the time with the kids. You have a terrific way of explaining things to them!”

Sherlock tried to shoot a polite smile back at her. He really had no idea what she was talking about. But it was, indeed, fun, getting the chance to meet with people who seemed to have a genuine curiosity about science and nature.

The group of school children left the room. He was standing in the artificial, moist heat, surrounded by tropical plants and free-flying butterflies, and suddenly felt in good spirits. This was turning out much better than he had anticipated.

He looked around the room for John, he was nowhere in sight. However, then he detected the little Watson girl, running at an alarming speed right towards him. She looked as if she could fall on her face at any moment. He really hoped that wouldn't happen, since that would mean that he, by the cruel twist of fate that this all was, would be the one responsible for comforting her. Where the hell was John, he wondered.

”Erlock!” the girl exclaimed.

”Sherlock,” he tried for the tenth time, exaggerating the sh-sound as he said it.

She got up to him. He didn’t know what to do. She was pulling at the fabric of his trousers.

”What’s that?” she asked, pointing at a particularly striking, blue butterfly that had landed on a plant before them, slowly flapping it’s wings.

”Morpho rhetenor,” he replied, causing the girl to unexplainably giggle.

”Cramer’s Blue Morpho, in English. It lives in the forests of northern South America. People used to make jewelry out of it’s wings.”

He was speaking mostly for his own sake, drawing to mind his vast knowledge on butterflies.

As a child, he’d actually used to be heavily into butterflies for a period of time. Maybe he’d been around seven years old. He had read everything the local library had to offer, and then made Mummy use her connections with the university to order paper copies of articles in journals like Ecological Entomology and American Zoologist.

He had been careful to not let John know about this part of his past, though, when he’d suggested - no, ordered - this excursion. No need to let John know that this was actually pretty exciting.

The girl was tugging at his sleeve this time. ”What’s that?”

Now she was pointing at a huge butterfly - a green and black one with a yellow rear body.

”That’s an Ornithoptera priamus.”

The girl laughed again, seemed delighted. Perhaps she found the latin names funny sounding. Children were so unpredictable.
"Common Green Birdwing. It’s from Australia. It belongs to the Swallowtail family. Only 600 species, but they include the world’s largest butterflies. The Swallowtail caterpillars have horns, you know, behind their heads. Can stink fairly bad."

"Ugh," said the Watson girl, pinching her nose.

"Well," he said, frowning, "it’s not like they are here stinking right now."

Then Sherlock noticed something that actually made his skin prickle, because he had never once seen a live specimen before. It had been at the top of his list, back then, as a little boy, and he could see now that it lived up to every one of his boyish expectations.

He surprised himself by wanting to share his enthusiasm.

Squatting down next to the girl, he pointed, making sure to keep his gestures slow and his voice hushed, to not disturb the enormous insect sitting on a branch not far away. He estimated it’s wingspan to be close to nine inches.

"Anna, look!" he said in a whisper. "An Ornithoptera alexandrae!"

The girl must have sensed his excitement, because this time she didn’t giggle at the name.

"Optera axa?" she whispered back, instead.

"Ornithoptera alexandrae,“ he repeated. "It’s a Swallowtail, too. Queen Alexandra’s Birdwing."

"A queen?" the girl said.

"Named after the Danish Queen Alexandra. This one is female, they are bigger and of a different color than the males. It’s the worlds largest butterfly, and it’s most rare.” Sherlock kept explaining.

"It lives in the mountain forests of the Oro province in Papua New Guinea. They’re supposed have an amazing gliding flight. Let’s see if we can get it to fly."

He blew a careful, soft puff of air towards the butterfly. It didn’t move.

The girl leaned forward to do the same. He noticed she wasn’t able to coordinate her lips sufficiently to blow the air stream in a focused direction, but choose not to try to correct her. He blew again, a bit harder. The girl did the same. She was looking back and forth between the butterfly and him, smiling.

And then the butterfly took flight; large wings majestically flapping to gather speed, and then it, indeed, glided for a long, beautiful moment before landing again a bit further away.

The girl jumped and clapped her hands in excitement as the large insect moved. He caught himself smiling back at her. Maybe she wasn’t so terrible after all, this little Watson person.

And then he noticed, in the corner of his eye, John standing at some distance, watching them intensely. How long had he been standing there? Sherlock felt a bit embarrassed, but couldn’t really pin point why. He turned to look at John, and saw in his eyes something that looked an awful lot like teary happiness.

Sherlock hurriedly turned away again, tried to school his face into bored nonchalance. He didn’t know exactly how successful he was in doing so, because John kept looking at him with that funny
expression throughout the rest of that day.
Although the day had gone well, Sherlock had still found it completely exhausting, this dealing with a young child-business. The ‘nice lunch’, as John had put it, had proved to be something Sherlock definitely did not look forward to repeating within the next ten years or so. The mess, the noise, the flapping of arms - both the girl's and theirs, to be fair-

He’d felt insanely relieved when they had parted ways in the late afternoon - John to drop off Anna, and Sherlock to go straight home to recuperate before dinner. The flat had never before seemed so wonderfully quiet.

As he lay dozing off, stretched out on the sofa, he kept seeing that little girl’s face before him. It had been a strange experience, the entire day, even though it had been so much better than expected. Come to think of it, maybe that was the strangest part of it all? The fact that he hadn’t minded more.

He had looked into that child’s face and suddenly realized she had John’s eyes. And John’s smile. It was John’s DNA, standing there in front of him. How peculiar it was, this circle of life.

For the first time ever, Sherlock found himself wondering what his child - the one he planned to never have, but still - what would his child look like? Be like?

His child. Wasn’t that the strangest concept. He had gone through almost forty years now, and in many ways, he was still thinking of himself as a child. Hell, he was often still treated like one, as well.

*Perhaps it was time for an update?*

Waking up disoriented an hour later, Sherlock texted John to ask if they could cancel the reservation and just stay home instead.

‘Perhaps we can make dinner here,’ he’d written, and by that he meant - obviously - that John could make dinner. John was very good at that.

The evening, so far, had been wonderful. *John* had been wonderful, even more so than usual. It seemed to have worked like some sort of magic spell, this whole getting along decently with the Watson girl, because John just wouldn’t stop beaming at him.

John was looking at him like - well, like he loved him. Which he said he did, said it every day, but it sure felt good, seeing it shine through John’s eyes like this.

Sherlock still hadn’t said it back. He wanted to. He knew that, was certain. It was just difficult. Never having said it before, he was uncertain of how to go about it. And maybe a tiny bit worried, too.

Worried, because somewhere deep down inside, he still had that nagging doubt whether his love would be something worth having. Especially for someone as perfect and wonderful and lovable as John.
So, it was nice, having John look at him like that. The last few days, since after that fight, had been hard. John had spent almost all his time working, just coming back to sleep, basically.

Sherlock, by contrast, hadn’t had a case for a while and had spent his days in an ever increasing boredom. He’d counted the minutes until John would be back from work, but when he finally was, they’d hardly even talked, much less had sex. It made Sherlock uncomfortable, this disconnect between them. It made his worrying thoughts pick up speed again.

But now, everything was fine again. More than fine.

The beaming aside, John wouldn’t stop touching him, either. Throughout dinner, there had been constant touches.

John’s hand on his hand. John’s hand, under the table, on his knee. John’s shoeless foot on the inside of his thigh. John’s sockless foot on Sherlock’s semi erect cock, skillfully teasing through the trousers. That last part had served as an effective trigger for them to get up from the table and take matters into the bedroom.

Sherlock was lying on his back, and John was on his side next to him, with one leg nestled in between Sherlock’s. He was cupping Sherlock’s jaw with his hand, holding his head in place while they were kissing. They’d been doing that for a long time now, John seemed to plan to keep at it indefinitely. Not that Sherlock in any way minded.

John’s warm, fuzzy mood appeared to have carried over into the sex, because Sherlock had never before felt him this overwhelmingly affectionate.

"I love you so much,” John whispered to his lips, and Sherlock practically melted inside. It was still hard to fully grasp that all this was real.

More kisses. Intense, deep.

"Sherlock,” John said softly, moving from kissing his lips to sucking his left earlobe.

"I love you,” he said again, sending shivers down Sherlock’s spine. He tightened his grip around John, squeezed him hard against his own naked body.

John started to kiss his way down Sherlock’s body, stopping briefly to suck on his nipples, first one, then the other. He kissed the large scar over his heart, so gently. Sherlock knew what John was thinking, and he squirmed a bit to get John away from there, not wanting those thoughts to get too firm a grip on John tonight.

Oh, if John could skip the teasing part and just hurry up! Sherlock was getting really impatient for what surely was to come. It was amazing, really, how good John had gotten with his mouth, in such a short amount of time. He didn't seem to mind at all, this whole concept of having a dick in his mouth, and for that Sherlock was most grateful.

When their test results had gotten back clean, it had helped them both to relax more in bed. Since Sherlock also had a bit of a thing for cum play, it was nice to be able to do away with the condoms for blow jobs.

The first time John had come in Sherlock’s mouth, allowing him to swallow most of it and then to kiss John with the remainder of the load still in his mouth, Sherlock had felt like he was quite possibly going to die of arousal.
He fought an impulse to push John's head down to speed things up a bit. It was obvious that John wanted to take things slow tonight, and that could certainly be nice as well. Or so he tried to tell himself.

John had made his way down to Sherlock's belly now, and he was nipping at the skin with his lips. It actually tickled quite a bit, causing Sherlock to giggle. John looked up and chuckled.

"One of these days, I’m going to find out exactly how ticklish you are," he said with a smile. "I’m going to hold you down and tickle you until you cry."

"As if you could," Sherlock scoffed.

John raised his eyebrows. "You don’t think I could! That’s ridiculous, sweetheart. We both know I’d take you down if I ever needed to."

Sherlock could see a slight annoyance in John’s eyes, which of course only spurred him on.

"Not only am I younger than you, I am also quite significantly taller, if you haven’t noticed," he teased.

Sherlock didn’t even see it coming, didn’t even know exactly how it had happened, but suddenly John was bent over him, holding Sherlock’s wrists in an iron grip over his head, pressing them down into the mattress.

John was using his entire body weight to hold him down, his legs serving as some sort of lock around Sherlock’s. It was, indeed, impossible to move.

"And I, in case you haven't noticed," John laughed under his breath, "am quite significantly stronger. You may be tall, and you may be a decent fighter, but against me you don’t stand a chance, love."

Sherlock huffed, more than a little peeved by this demonstration. He’d known this would be the case, but it was still a bit frustrating to see that he really was that much inferior to John, strength wise. Maybe he should start a weight lifting routine.

However, it was not all unpleasant, feeling John’s raw strength holding him in place. In fact, quite the opposite. He heard his own breath hitch.

"Well, aren't you a sight," John said with a playful smirk, looking down at Sherlock’s erection.

By now, he was completely hard. John kept holding him down; he leaned forward and kissed his neck, let his teeth scrape it. Sherlock felt a drop of pre-cum trickle down his shaft, landing at the soft skin at the base. He’d made a last minute decision to get rid of his pubic hair completely at his most recent waxing appointment, and John had seemed to like it, once he’d gotten over his initial shock that a bloke would actually go to someone for his intimate grooming.

John didn't let go of his tight grip around Sherlock's wrists, it was starting to hurt a bit but the overall sensation was well worth it. John was naked on top of him, and it was such a mind blowing thing. When their cocks brushed together, Sherlock gasped and John moaned.

John repeated the motion, now with more precision. Slowly, slowly, he moved his hips so that his cock glided along the length of Sherlock's. It caused his entire body to tense in anticipation.

Sherlock bucked his hips up to increase this wonderful friction, but it had the opposite effect, and made John's cock slip off Sherlock's and fall heavily against Sherlock's buttocks instead. They both
inhaled sharply in response to this unexpected – and suggestive – touch.

Sherlock didn't dare to move. He stayed as still as he could, waiting to see what John would do next. Given John's most careful avoidance of anything even slightly indicative of this, he really didn't know at all what to think. He hadn't had the guts to ask, either.

All he knew was that there was something about anal sex that John had an issue with. His best guess, was that it was simply too gay for him. If so, that was, to be honest, more than a little disappointing, since this was something that Sherlock really enjoyed – but it certainly wasn't important enough to risk upsetting John over. So he'd just kept his questions to himself.

John buried his face in Sherlock's neck, kept kissing him there, and after a moment, he moved. Ever so slowly, he lifted his hips up, and Sherlock thought that he was going to break the touch to reposition himself somewhere safer. But he didn't. Instead, he let his cock slide back down again, touching the sensitive skin of Sherlock's scrotum, and then moved until he was once again rubbing his dick against Sherlock's arse.

Sherlock closed his eyes but couldn't help to let out an outdrawn, needy whimper. God, what if John actually could consider this-

He felt his dick twitch at the prospect.

His wrists were released, abruptly. Holding himself up on one underarm against the bed, John moved his other hand over Sherlock's flank, down, and then grabbed Sherlock's arse firmly. On his next downward movement, John pushed a bit harder, and there it was – John's cock, now actually partially nestled in between Sherlock's buttocks.

“Oh god,” Sherlock whispered when he felt it. The sensation was an incredible turn-on.

John still had his face buried in Sherlock's neck, so there was no way of reading his facial expression. But Sherlock heard his breath get faster, more insistent.

Sherlock couldn't believe this was happening. The feeling of John's dick, so very suggestively positioned, oh, it was absolutely fantastic. He tried very, very hard to retain his self control, because his entire body was screaming to move, to push down his arse harder against John's cock, to lift his legs up for a better angle-

Dear lord, how he wanted to do all that. But for now, he needed to focus on not scaring John away.

The bed swayed a little as John moved again. Still practically lying down over Sherlock, John moved his hand to grab his own dick. Then, ever so slowly, he began to drag his cock up and down between Sherlock's buttocks. He was breathing hot air into Sherlock's neck.

With his hand now guiding his dick, the movements got much more controlled, more decisive. John was leaking pre-cum in no small amount, which made the slide so much more arousing. Sherlock moaned loudly, couldn't help it.

“Oh fuck, baby,” John grunted in response. He kept moving his dick along Sherlock's arse, in a nice and steady rhythm. Sherlock noticed that John's shoulder was beginning to tremble from the effort of keeping his upper body raised for so long.

“Oh...” Sherlock decided it was probably safe to move his hips a little. He did. It felt amazing, but he still needed more. More, right now.

“John-” he whispered again, insistently.
“Tell me, baby-” John said in a low, hoarse voice, his face still against Sherlock's neck.

The fact that John wouldn't look up as he spoke, was a clear indication that he thought this was really difficult. It was quite unlike John, to be this – whatever he was? Embarrassed, maybe? Ashamed?

Probably, because now he didn't finish what he'd started to ask.

“Tell you what?” Sherlock panted. He had a little bit of trouble thinking straight; the wet slide of John's dick between his buttocks turned out to be a rather powerful distractor.

"Did you mean it?” John seemed quite aroused, judging by the state of his breathing. He kept rocking slowly against Sherlock as he spoke, his lips grazing the wet skin on Sherlock's neck and ear.

Sherlock rocked his hips into John, wanting more so badly.

"What?” he managed to get out after a few seconds.

"That thing you said, a long time ago, at the bar… Do you really like it?”

"What, John?” Sherlock was panting heavily. He knew what John was trying to ask, but couldn't understand why was he being so impossibly vague about it.

Finally, John lifted his head, held it up so that they were face to face. Sherlock met John's eyes and saw that they were dark with arousal. When John spoke, still staring into Sherlock's eyes, his voice was thick and raspy.

"Do you like to take it up the arse, Sherlock?”

Sherlock gasped, startled by the wording just as much as by the fact that John had finally put this question so bluntly on the table.

"Tell me, do you?” He gave a few thrusts as he spoke, and Sherlock could feel his own heart beating fast and hard. This was a different side of John, coming out to play.

"Yes,” Sherlock finally managed to croak. He heard that his own voice sounded muffled.

“Because you see,” John half whispered, “I really don't like to do things that only I benefit from,” and Sherlock suddenly understood why this entire business had been dragged out for so long. Beautiful John, thinking that this would somehow be a sacrifice on Sherlock's part-

“So I need you to be really honest with me about this,” John continued, looking more focused now. “Would you really like to try this with me?”

Sherlock could hardly believe this conversation.

“Oh god, John, you have no idea how much I want this-”

“Is that so?” John whispered, smiling dangerously.

Sherlock was pushing his hips hard against John, feeling like perhaps he was going to come just from this. His cock was pressed hard against his own stomach, absolutely leaking at this point, still achingly untouched.

“Mm hm,” he replied, getting more turned on now than he could ever remember being. John
wanted to fuck him. Oh sweet Jesus.

“Say it,” John grunted, let go of his dick, let it rest thick and heavy against Sherlock's arse. He reached up and closed his hand firmly around Sherlock's erection.

Sherlock had been so focused on the amazing interaction unfolding, and hadn't paid much attention to that particular part of himself for a while now. But feeling John's fist around him, as John began to stroke him in a quite decisive pace, reminded him how close to the edge he already was. He moaned with relief at the touch, momentarily throwing his head back into the pillow.

“I want to hear you say it, love,” John demanded again.

“John,” Sherlock whispered, "I would like you to fuck me, I've dreamt of it for so long-”

John let out a grunt-like sound, it was almost pained.

"When?" he growled in Sherlock's ear, still jerking him aggressively. "When can I fuck you?"

Sherlock felt like he was going to go mad with desire. This was really happening. He heard himself make a desperate sound of some kind.

“Right now would be good,” he whimpered, in the far back of his mind feeling thankful for the timely coincidence that made this true.

At the times in his life when penetrative sex had been a regularly recurring feature, he'd used to maintain a much more controlled schedule of all the things that went into being able to bottom. But since he'd just about given up hope that John would ever want this, he hadn't really bothered lately. Lucky stroke tonight, though.

“I'd love for you to fuck me right now, John,” he mumbled, pushing hard into John's fist. “I've waited so many years to feel your cock up my arse; I really don't think I can wait any longer.”

As he said it, he drew his knees upwards, planted his feet flat on the mattress.

“Oh fuck, Sherlock.” John growled. “Fuck, I'm not going to last if you say things like that.” He leaned in to kiss him, deep, sloppily, and there was an urgency present between them now.

"I'm going to make it so good for you, love,” John whispered, then kissed him. Sherlock felt his body tremble.
Chapter 31

About ten minutes later - Sherlock wasn’t sure because the dimension of time, in some strange way, seemed to have disappeared - he was lying on his back with one leg resting over John’s good shoulder, and the other drawn up as much as he could manage. And John - it was truly unbelievable - was kneeling in between his legs, with Sherlock’s dick in his mouth. And at the same time, he had his middle finger pushed into his hole, slowly fingering him.

Sherlock’s entire body felt on fire. He heard himself making a constant stream of small, needy sounds, but couldn’t be bothered to keep it down. It would have been impossible, anyhow.

John was sucking the glans of his dick, and simultaneously keeping a nice rhythm with his finger.

"Oh god, John, oh god," he moaned loudly. "I can’t wait for you to fuck me."

John let his dick slide out of his mouth. "I’m getting there, love,” he said in a raspy voice. "Just have some other things to do first."

Sherlock happily laid back with his head on the pillow, waiting for John to resume. But he didn’t. Instead he pulled out his finger, it felt empty now without it there. Sherlock was getting ready to file a vocal complaint about this development, but was instead, once again, taken off guard by John’s fearless skills as a lover.

He heard himself gasp loudly out into the room, as John spread his buttocks with two firm hands, and then licked a hot, wet line across his arse.

He felt his face burn. He knew he was completely clean, having been very thorough in the shower he’d taken when John had made dinner. But still. This was not something he’d imagined John ever doing.

The tip of John’s tongue was flickering across his hole, and Sherlock squirmed in equal parts pleasure and embarrassment. Then he began to lick; his tongue flat and wide, wet and warm against Sherlock’s sensitive skin. Sherlock had lost all control now over the sounds he made, he just let it all happen.

"Do you like this? Is this good?” John asked from down there. Sherlock forced himself to meet John’s eyes, and saw fire in them.

"Oh god,” Sherlock panted in return. "Can’t you tell? It’s amazing, John-”

"Good,” John interrupted. "I love the way you taste,” and then he put his head down in between Sherlock’s legs again.

Sherlock had to bite his lip not to yell out loud. John had pointed his tongue, and without warning, he’d pushed it in, teasing and poking the strong muscle there. Sherlock tried to collect himself enough to relax the muscles. When he eventually was able to, John immediately noticed and took advantage, quickly replacing his tongue with his finger again. When he made a featherlight brush against the prostrate, Sherlock groaned loadly.

"Shh, baby, you have to keep it down a bit, or Mrs. Hudson will call the police,” John smiled.

"Uh, ah,” Sherlock moaned. "Don’t talk about- OH! God!”
Without warning, John had pushed in a second finger, and he was slowly scissoring them to stretch Sherlock open further.

Earlier, Sherlock had heard the lid of the lube bottle being snapped open. John must have managed to apply more using just one hand, because he felt John’s fingers slide, deliciously slippery and warm, in and almost out of his hole. His hips were moving on their own accord now. Sherlock’s moans and grunts mixed with John’s heavy breathing and occasional encouraging words.

"Look at you," Sherlock heard him whisper. "Such a good boy, opening up for me," and Sherlock shivered. "It’s going to feel so good to push into that pretty pucker."

"Oh, fuck!" Sherlock heard himself say. He couldn’t stand the wait, he needed more.

John laughed a soundless, breathy laugh.

"Please, John-" Sherlock stuttered out. "I’m ready, fuck me now-"

John made a long exhale through o-shaped lips. It sounded like he was trying to calm himself down.

"Not quite yet love, I don’t want to hurt you," he said, and then Sherlock felt the fingertip of John’s ring finger gently push at his opening.

"Do you think you can take a third?" he asked in that gravelly voice; pushing and poking around the rim with the fingertip. When Sherlock nodded affirmatively, John wiggled in the third finger into his anus.

"Ow!" Sherlock couldn’t hold back the exclamation, because it had burned quite a lot more than he had expected.

John immediately froze. "I’m so sorry," he said and began to carefully pull out his fingers.

"No, don’t," said Sherlock. John stopped, held his hand completely still. 
"I just need a little time to adjust, it’s okay, don’t you dare."

John smiled a little. "Alright. But you have to promise to tell me if you want to stop. We do not have to do this you know."

"You must be insane," Sherlock panted. "If you don’t fuck me tonight, I swear I’m going to kill you."

"Well, in that case," John chuckled breathily.

Sherlock closed his eyes, focused on breathing and relaxing.

"Now," he said, and John started to move his fingers, ever so slowly, all three held tightly together. Sherlock felt them glide, in and almost but not completely out, and whimpered. The pain had subsided, and was quickly being replaced by intense pleasure.

Eventually, John increased the pace, and Sherlock started to slowly meet his movements, pushing down further on John’s hand.

Without saying a word, he pulled out his fingers, ever so gently, and Sherlock knew he’d decided it was time. He looked at John, took in his every move, as he released Sherlock’s leg from his shoulder, leaned over and kissed him.
Their eyes met. John’s were smiling and kind and radiating desire.

"How would you like to do this, baby?"

Sherlock considered this briefly, and at the same time, was overcome by a strong feeling of unreality. Was this happening? Was John leaning over him right now, asking him how he’d like to be fucked?

It seemed more probable that this was some kind of drug-induced hallucination, actually. But fortunately, luckily, amazingly enough, he knew it was real. It was real and happening, and his whole body was tingling with love and happiness and arousal.

"I would like to see your face," Sherlock said as coherently as he could manage. "But-" He hesitated.

"But…?" John prompted.

"Given your, er, size and all, maybe it would be better to start, er.. differently."

John smiled again, and then moved to grab Sherlock in a strong grip. He coaxed him downwards until he was sitting up at the edge of the bed, and then, with his hands, John made him turn around. It resulted in Sherlock standing on all fours on the bed with his arse turned to John, who was now standing up next to it. Sherlock felt the bed sway as John put one heavy knee on the bed, next to his thigh.

"Oh god, Sherlock," John moaned, and Sherlock felt his hands sliding and caressing all over his back and his behind. "Oh god, you’re gorgeous. I can’t believe I get to do this with you."

Sherlock heard the clicking sound from the lube bottle again, and then winced a little at the cold sensation as John was applying a generous amount inside and around his already sensitive hole. John pushed in two fingers again, they slid in without resistance this time.

"John, John," Sherlock whimpered. John reached over him with his free arm to grab a pillow, pushed it in under Sherlock’s belly.

"Do you want me to wear a rubber anyway?" he asked, and Sherlock shook his head.

"No. Not unless you want to."

"Not really, no," John mumbled, then withdrew his fingers and instead, put his two strong hands - one sticky, one dry - on each side of Sherlock’s waist.

It’s really happening now, Sherlock thought to himself as he felt John get in close behind him and then starting to grind his by now very hard dick between his buttocks. He heard John’s heavy breathing, felt his trembling hands on his skin.

John leaned forward over him, kissed his back. He had removed one of his hands from his waist; Sherlock guessed he was using it to guide his dick into the right spot.

"You’re beautiful," John whispered, and then Sherlock felt the unmistakable sensation of John’s hard yet velvety soft dick pushing against his hole. Oh dear lord, how he’d waited for this moment.

John moaned loudly as the head of his dick breached Sherlock in one steady motion. Sherlock was busy controlling his breathing, trying to prevent his muscles to clench. It hurt, a bit, but surprisingly little given John’s size. Maybe John had been right about taking his time with the
preparations.

The only sound in the room was the audible breathing from them both. John was absolutely still, and Sherlock felt his own heart pounding in his chest. Then John started to move.

At first, he kept the movements minimal, rocking his hips ever so slightly. Sherlock was beginning to experience that particular type of disconnect from the world, where his mind would still and this - the present moment - would become his only focus. John kept pushing in, and eventually, was as far in as it was possible.

It was only John, now. Only John that existed for Sherlock. He heard himself whimper, and he heard John respond with a groan.

"Fuck," John whispered. "Fuck, you feel absolutely amazing."

Sherlock was relaxed by now, and able to fully enjoy it when John slowly started to fuck him properly. He hung his head down between his arms, and was able to see a little bit of it all. His erection had waned as John had entered him, but the sight that met him was enough to cause his dick to start to fill with blood again.

As they both were able to begin to move a bit faster, Sherlock noticed how John’s excitement increased. His body was tenser, his respiration more shallow, his pulse higher. The sounds he made; the moans, the grunts - they all fed straight into Sherlock’s own arousal.

Their bodies were connected, and not solely in the most obvious sense.

John’s hands had been caressing his back for a while, but now Sherlock felt a hand pressing firmly between his shoulder blades. He took the hint and let his upper body sink down more; the side of his face in the pillow, his shoulders too.

He wrapped his arms around the head pillow for support, and let his belly rest against the other pillow that John had put there earlier. His arse was up in the air - perhaps not the most dignified of poses, but it did it’s job. In this position, he knew John would be able to enter him even farther.

When he did, Sherlock grabbed tight fistfuls of the pillow and moaned, too loud of course, but John seemed pretty far gone too because he didn’t hush him this time.

"More, John,” he moaned. "Fuck me harder,” and John made a guttural sound behind him.

The pace had picked up, it was beginning to turn frantic. John leaned over him more, as far as he could probably reach. He put his hands on Sherlock’s upper arms, and held him down steadily as he kept slamming into him.

This very nearly drove Sherlock over the edge, even though the only direct stimulation he was getting was from the friction against the pillow underneath him. The slapping sounds of skin meeting skin filled the room, filled Sherlock’s mind.

Sherlock recognized the signs of John getting close to climax, too. It seemed like he had deduced this a few moments before John realized it himself, because shortly after, John froze.

"Don’t move,” he said in a strained voice.

Sherlock didn’t, but smiled hazily into his pillow. John. His John.

John pulled out, abruptly.
"God baby, you make me lose all control," he panted. "Sherlock-"

John crawled up on the bed, bent down over him, kissed him sloppily and wantingly.

"You feel so fucking amazing," he said, smiling a little. His scent was a lovely mix of sex and passion.

They kissed more, there was fire in their every touch.

"I’m not going to last much longer, love, it’s too good. I want to see you when I come," said John.

John was going to come. Come from fucking him. Sherlock shivered.

********************

After some adjustment and moving about, Sherlock found himself lying on his back again, with both legs folded over John’s shoulders this time. He loved the fact that he was now able to see John’s face, read his eyes. John leaned forward, their tongues met in a wet kiss.

"Sherlock," John said softly, then Sherlock felt the increasing pressure as John began to push into him again. John kept looking straight into his eyes as he did. The mood between them had shifted when they moved; morphed from passionately heated into something softer and more even more intimate.

Sherlock had always scoffed at the word *lovetaking*, thought that it was a ridiculous euphemism, used by people who were too uptight to admit they liked to fuck. But right now, he thought that perhaps he needed to revise that opinion.

John was slowly rocking into him, and ever so often, he’d lean down to kiss some more.

"You’re so fucking beautiful," John whispered to him, still gazing into his eyes. Sherlock felt the muscles in his body starting to tremble, particularly so his legs. Maybe it was from the physical exertion, but it felt like there was more to it, as well.

*John and I*, he thought. Their bodies were connected; their minds too.

Then John seemed to have decided to step it up a notch. He was beginning to thrust harder, faster. Sherlock was hard again, his cock pressed tightly down against his stomach as John kept pushing into him.

"Fuck, fuck," John was mumbling. He had raised his body up more, was standing on his knees, holding both of Sherlock’s legs in a tight grip by the ankles. It was a thin line between pleasure and pain now, but Sherlock loved every second.

Due to John’s newfound fervour, the headboard of the bed was starting to slam into the wall. John let go of his legs and, still deep inside of Sherlock, reached for one of the pillows, propped it between the wall and the bed. Sherlock must have been smiling, because John looked at him and did the same.

It seemed to Sherlock that John was getting close, again. His eyes were hazy in that particular way that they would get, just before.

Sherlock wrapped his legs around John’s hips and arse, allowed himself to be rocked back and forth in the quick pace that John was setting.
John’s hand on his thigh, the other one on his dick. Sherlock might as well have received an electrical shock, because that’s how strongly the sensation tore through his body.

He bucked his hips up, let out a drawn out *aah*. His noises turned into sharper exclamations as John started to twist his hand on every upstroke, gliding over the head with his thumb.

"Yes, love," John groaned. "That’s it. I love fucking you, you feel so fucking good-”

"John-" was the only thing Sherlock managed to stutter out. "John-”

He felt his body beginning to tense up, getting closer to orgasm.

John was staring into Sherlock’s eyes, never breaking the contact.

"You’re gorgeous,” John said.

"God,” moaned Sherlock, his eyes heavy now, he fought to keep them open and on John.

"Amazing, fantastic-”

Sherlock gasped. A familiar feeling began to stir within him. John’s words affected him just as much as the touch of his hand.

"John, John-”

"Brilliant and beautiful and kind-”

Sherlock whimpered, it sounded more like a cry of pain, but John would know better.

"You’re the only one for me Sherlock, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had-”

"I love you, John-”

The words simply escaped Sherlock, completely unplanned. He was a little bit stunned that he’d said it, but John did not give him any time to fret about it.

"Oh my god, I love you too,” he said, leaned over to meet him in a desperate, open-mouthed kiss.

Sherlock felt himself getting absolutely overwhelmed with emotion. He could tell it was only a matter of seconds for both of them, now.

He was dizzy from the intense sensation of John stroking him and fucking him simultaneously. Sherlock was only faintly aware that he was saying things; he just let it happen.

"I love you, I love you, I love you,” and then he felt the wave falling over, crashing-

His arms were tightly wrapped around John’s back; it was drenched in sweat.

There were one, two, three, four strong spurts of release; his muscles contracted around John’s cock. He felt the world shut down around him, felt the noise in his head grow quiet.

"God Sherlock, fuck, fuck-” he heard John groan. Sherlock tried with all his might to focus, because he didn’t want to miss this for the world.

He saw the expression of John’s face change. He saw the furrow between his eyebrows, saw him closing his eyes, and then, felt the muscles in John’s body contract as he started to come inside of
him.

John’s entire upper body was heaving, he was still sort of sitting in between Sherlock’s legs, his dick still inside him.

"Oh god," John said, short of breath but smiling now. "Oh my god."

Slowly, carefully, John pulled out. Sherlock winced. He was going to feel this for a couple of days. John didn’t notice the pained expression on his face, because he was busy staring down at what was sure to be a graphic sight.

"Fuck," John whispered. Sherlock felt his sphincter muscles tighten reflexively. Semen was trickling out of him, making a trail down his skin, causing a wet spot to form at the mattress underneath.

Sherlock drew a sharp breath. John was still staring down, transfixed, and had unexpectedly put his index finger into Sherlock’s hole. The muscles immediately yielded. Sherlock braced himself for it to sting, but it didn’t. John pushed his finger in and out a few times, made a few low grunts in response to the wet sounds it produced, before pulling it out. He smeared some of the cum around the hole, drew circles in the wet mess with his fingers. When Sherlock laughed a little, John looked up at him, then pushed two fingers back in again. He smiled at Sherlock's startled reaction.

So. John apparently shared his little fetish. Sherlock had expected him to like it a bit dirty, but this was still an interesting turn of events.

"Oh fuck," John said again in a near whisper, looking happily at Sherlock. "I'll remember this for as long as I live."

John flopped down next to Sherlock, put his right arm around him and pulled him very close. Sherlock returned the embrace. He felt completely content, at peace.

John stroked his back, touched his cheek, smoothed the sweaty curls away from his forehead. But as Sherlock was coming back to reality, a slightly uncomfortable feeling was beginning to snake it’s way in next to the happy ones.

He had said it. He’d said the words, for the first time in his life. And he meant them, so that wasn’t a problem. But what if John didn’t really want him to feel that way? What if Sherlock’s ’I love you’ meant something much bigger than John’s? It seemed so easy for John to throw the words around. And what if John would now start to think that Sherlock was clingy and needy or something worse? He already knew John sometimes thought he was difficult. What if the fact that he’d said it now, would cause John to-"

As the train of worrying what-if’s gained speed, Sherlock averted his eyes, buried his face in John’s neck. He felt a blush starting to spread across his cheeks, and regret building in his chest.

"Sherlock," John spoke gently. He was still a little bit out of breath, his voice was hoarse. 'Look at me."

Sherlock looked up eventually, met his eyes.

"Sherlock," John said again, and just hearing his name in John’s kind, soft voice made him feel better. "I can’t deduce things like you can, so it would be helpful if you told me what it is that you’re concerned about? Because you see, from my perspective, everything is absolutely perfect. This was- I can’t even put it into words. I think - no, I know - that I’ve never felt like this before.” He smiled a little.
Sherlock thought about John’s words. Maybe his feelings were indeed reciprocated? The evidence certainly pointed at that. He wondered if he could allow himself to believe it was true.

"I told you that I love you," Sherlock mumbled.

John’s expression went from affectionate to apprehensive, in less than a second.

"Are you trying to tell me that you didn’t mean it?" John said tensely.

Sherlock’s mind had to make a U-turn before he could reply.

"What? No! How could you even- no!"

And finally, it was beginning to sink it, to really take hold. John had seen him at all his worsts. Had lived through cases, bombs, the fall, the two year exile. Seen his problems with drugs, been asked to stay away, seen Sherlock with someone else instead of him - had even been supportive, despite it all. And yet, here he was now, naked and spent next to him.

*John must really love him, too.*

Sherlock took a deep breath.

"John. I love you. I meant to say it, always, but then I never did. There were so many times when I came close. Like on the phone that time, from the rooftop- but then I thought, you know, maybe that would ruin how you’d think of me when I was gone-"

John was not breaking their eye contact, he seemed to be taking in Sherlock’s every word. Sherlock had by no means planned this emotional outpouring, but once he’d started, he found it difficult to stop. So much he’d wanted to say to John, for so long.

"And after the fire, and in the train car. And on your stag night, and at your wedding, I got this ridiculous impulse to just say it, but then again, it was your wedding so it seemed kind of pointless… and at the tarmac, I came really close-"

"I know," John interrupted. "All those times, Sherlock, I remember them, too. I felt it, too. I just couldn’t allow myself to-" John groaned, put his hand over his face. "I’ve been such a goddamn idiot, Sherlock, for so many years. I wish I could have been brave enough to hear what you were trying to say."

"No, John," said Sherlock. "You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who should have acted differently. I’m so sorry I didn’t."

They were lying side by side as they were talking, arms still wrapped around each other. John reached out to touch his cheek, and Sherlock realized it was wet. John’s eyes seemed a bit moist, too.

"Look at us both,” John said, suddenly smiling. "I don’t know about you, but I’ve just had the best goddamn sex of my entire life. And the man I love more than anything has just told me that he, by some divine intervention, loves me, too. So there really should be no reason for crying, here.” He smiled, a contagious grin.

John kissed him, Sherlock kissed him back.

"I love you,” John said. His eyes were sparkling. "You are everything to me. I love you to the moon and back, Sherlock.”
Sherlock knew he was grinning big now.

"In that case, I love you half a million miles, too!"

"I thought you’d deleted that kind of irrelevant trivia?" John laughed softly.

"Just made a quick estimate. Was I right?"

"Not really," said John, and Sherlock wondered how it was possible to feel this happy.

"I know I was," he couldn’t resist to mumble.

John chuckled, pulled him even closer.

"Of course you were, love."
Chapter 32

It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and John was sitting in his chair with a Tom Clancy novel that he was beginning to suspect that he had already read. But since he couldn't remember how it ended, he figured he might as well keep at it, too comfortable now to get up to try to find something else.

Every once in a while, there would be a particularly loud thump coming from the upstairs floor, and he'd pause to look up to the ceiling, wondering what the hell was going on in his old bedroom. Sherlock had been manically busy the last couple of days, going through the vast stacks of papers and journals and random experimental equipment that had been building up there over the last two years.

Apparently, there was something particular, some especially important paper that he needed to find, and when Sherlock had told him that, John had just laughed out loud.

“Good luck with that, love, I think you'll need it,” he'd chuckled, and gotten an angry stare from Sherlock in return.

At this point, it was almost impossible to even get in through the door there. John had tried once, very quickly given up, and proceeded to make a snarky remark to Sherlock about how he would be a suitable participant in *Britain's Biggest Hoarders*.

Naturally Sherlock hadn't watched it. So that weekend, when they had been at Janine's cottage in Sussex Downs, and it had been raining for 24 hours non stop and not even Sadie wanted to go outside, John had made him.

Just for the heck of it, of course. But for once, it had been right up Sherlock's alley, and they'd spent one evening and an entire afternoon binge watching in bed.

It had been a grey and chilly November weekend, and it was the second time that they'd gratefully accepted Janine's offer to borrow the cottage.

By now, it was evident that Janine's romanticized fantasy of having a cottage in the country didn't quite match the reality. Like a water leak in the kitchen, broken radiators and a badger underneath the house.

There had also been the constant battle with the grass, that in the blink of an eye had grown so tall that the lawn mower couldn't do the job. It'd had to be dealt with the old fashion way, with a scythe. John had laughed until tears were streaming down his face when she'd told the story of how she'd convinced a random guy from the local pub to do it for free.

But Sherlock loved it. John had been amazed to see how Sherlock had instantly seemed to relax when they got out there. It was as if all the tension and anxiety that would normally haunt him, would just wash off as they stepped out of the Land Rover and onto the graveled driveway of the small, privately located cottage.

Sherlock would immediately go to the bedroom to change out of his tailored shirt and suit trousers, to come back out dressed in ill fitting jogging bottoms and some sweater that had seen it's better days a long time ago. Both times it had happened, John had not been able to resist dragging him down on the sofa with him, touching that skinny body through the soft layers of the worn cotton clothes.
They had gone for long walks in the forest – with Sadie on a leash, thank you very much – and in the evenings, walked for thirty minutes, one way, to get to the pub for fish and chips and some entertainment – it was one of John's favourite pastimes in the world – sitting side by side with Sherlock in a corner of a pub or a restaurant, reveling in the deductions he'd make, for John's sake of course, about the other guests around them.

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John put the Clancy book down in his lap – by now he was pretty sure how it ended - and took a sip of his coffee. Once again, he felt a faint flutter of nervousness in his stomach when he thought about what he was planning to give Sherlock tonight.

He was aware that it was a bit too much – no, a whole lot too much, if one only saw to how short of time they'd been together as lovers. But he really didn't think it was fair to see their relationship in the light of just how long they'd been having sex.

When John thought about it all now, he really felt, strongly and deeply, that their relationship – and his love for Sherlock – had begun the moment they first met, in the lab at S:t Bart's, and then it had just kept developing.

Sure, they'd experienced more obstacles than most people do in a lifetime, but that was history now. His marriage with Mary sometimes seemed to him like some sort of illusion, something that had never really happened. Anna, on the other hand, was such an ingrained part of his life by now that he, in contrast, could hardly remember the time when she hadn't existed.

The darkest period of all, without doubt, had been after Sherlock's fall from the rooftop. John still tried hard to keep those two years firmly out of his mind. His therapist had suggested they should revisit it, work it through, but he had refused. No, keeping it out of mind worked just fine – usually.

Once in a while, he'd still have a nightmare about it, but as long as he could wake up next to Sherlock, curl up against his warm body, it was alright. A few times, he had woken up in a cold sweat with a beating heart on a night when he'd been alone back at his place – that had been harder. On those occasions, he'd had to get up, check on Anna, pour himself a drink to be able to eventually go back to sleep.

Since that day at the museum, it was like they had reached a new level of intimacy. Not only because of what had happened that night, although that certainly had been amazing, but because Sherlock seemed to have found a way to accept Anna's presence in John's life.

Sherlock still didn't want her to stay at Baker Street, though. It would be a lie to say John didn't find this frustrating, but he figured that in time, Sherlock was bound to come around. And until then, he'd just keep his own place – it wasn't like he couldn't afford it.

With his current job, the money was insanely good. Unfortunately, it was also insanely stressful to not be able to go on cases with Sherlock the way he wanted to. Particularly when Sherlock would come back home with some sort of injury.

Already, there had been one phone call from Lestrade, telling him to come get Sherlock at the hospital after he’d gotten a concussion. Some guy had attacked him and Sherlock hadn’t managed to fend him off in time. John knew that wouldn't be the last time something like it happened, either.

When he thought like that, he felt strongly that he needed to find a way to get back to be by Sherlock’s side for cases. It was just so damn hard to decide to let go of this thing he had now,
where he, not Sherlock or anyone else, was the one people turned to.

He knew Sherlock was angry about it, too. He was bringing it up less now than before, but John figured the only reason for that was that Sherlock didn't want them to fight – and that was how it always ended up, that particular discussion.

Mycroft had made his strong opinion on the matter known, as well. When they'd first gotten together again, Mycroft had been suspiciously absent. But all good things must come to an end, and one tired Wednesday morning in October, after a grueling fifteen hour shift, the black car had been waiting for John at the hospital main entrance.

After forty minutes of interrogation, mixed with what John could only think of as thinly disguised threats about various things he should or shouldn't do (quitting his job had been one of the shoulds), he had been dropped off at Baker Street.

But despite the utter annoyance of all this, John had still felt mostly happy about it. Happy, because just before he'd gotten into the car for his lift back home, Mycroft had stopped him.

“John, by the way,” he'd said in that typical manner of his, “it's good to have you back at Baker Street,” and his smile had seemed so genuine that John was compelled to return it.

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They’d ordered up the usual from the Chinese place. It was only a few blocks away but maybe the kitchen was very busy, this night before Christmas, because they had had to wait for almost an hour for the food to get there. They had eaten it straight out of the boxes, and were now both seated back in the sofa. John decided it was time.

"Sherlock,” he began. "I know you said you wanted us to skip the Christmas presents. And you don’t have to think of this as that, even. But I do have a little something that I want to give you.”

He usually didn’t feel nervous about giving gifts or making other types of romantic gestures, but this time, he did. Maybe because he was so unsure of how Sherlock would react.

Sherlock furrowed his eyebrows. "But why?” he said, looking genuinely confounded.

John laughed softly. "Why do you think, Mister Genius? Because I love you very much and wanted to give you something. And this thing just happened to come up. Good timing, that was all.”

Sherlock still had that funny looking expression on his face, as if he really did not understand why John would be holding out a small, wrapped box for him the night before Christmas. He tentatively began to open it.

"What’s this?” Sherlock asked, looking even more confused than before. He was holding in his hand the key that John had placed inside the little box.

"It’s a key, love. You use it to lock and unlock doors, usually.” He smiled.

"Yes, I figured out that much by myself,” Sherlock said back, still not smiling. "But why have you given me the key to Janine’s place in Sussex Downs?”

John smiled, amazed as always at Sherlock’s observational skills.

"Janine wanted to get rid of the cottage. You know, it was too much work for her, and she was never there anyway. And we both love to be there. So I thought… Your name is on the contract for
fifty percent of the ownership. I hope you don’t mind. I know maybe I should have asked you, but I
wanted it to be a surprise…”

John felt increasingly worried that maybe this had been a bad idea. But then, finally, Sherlock
broke out into the biggest, happiest grin.

"This is–" he began. "John - I don’t know what to say. This is the nicest thing I’ve ever-” He put
the key down on the sofa table, wrapped his arms around John.

"You got it for us," he mumbled into John’s shirt. "For us, to be there together.” John thought that
Sherlock’s voice sounded a little bit thicker than usual.

"This is amazing. We’re going to have so much fun there, you and I,” Sherlock kept on, and now it
was John’s turn to choke up a little.

"We sure are, love,” he smiled back, stroking his fingers through Sherlock’s unruly curls. "We sure
are.”

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They ended up kissing in the sofa for a long time. Just as John was going to offer to make some tea,
Sherlock looked up at him.

"John! Guess what. I have a small surprise for you, too.” He smiled, looking very pleased with
himself.

"It’s obviously nothing near what you just gave me, but then that would be a bit hard to match. I
hope you’ll like it anyway.” He looked expectantly at John.

John usually liked giving gifts a whole lot more than receiving them, and he felt a little bit
uncomfortable now. It was, however, going to be interesting to see what Sherlock had thought out
for him. This could go in absolutely any direction.

"It’s upstairs, in your old room,” Sherlock said and grabbed John by the hand, impatiently dragging
him up the stairs to the floor above.

They stopped in front of the closed door.

"Ready?” said Sherlock, by now almost jumping with excitement. He reminded John of a little boy
on Christmas - which in a way, John thought, was precisely what he was.

"Ready,” said John, and Sherlock swung the door open.

John felt his jaw drop.

The mess he’d seen before was completely gone, not a single paper in sight. The walls had been
repainted in a soft yellow hue, and the roof was a dark blue, with small plastic stars scattered all
over, it looked like the kind that glows in the dark. His old bed had a new, smaller duvet and new
pillows, and was made up in an adorable bed set with a butterfly motif. The bedside table had been
painted white, and on top of it was a lamp in the shape of a rabbit. The carpet was replaced; the
new one looked so clean and fluffy that John hardly wanted to step on it, and new curtains were up
in the window.

He felt absolutely speechless, was standing there in silence, with his mouth open, just looking
around the room, trying to take it all in.
"Do you think she’ll like it?" Sherlock asked nervously.

"Oh my god, Sherlock," John managed to get out. "Just- oh my god."

He tried to get a grip on himself.

"Forgive me Sherlock, I’m just stunned, that’s all. This is- I’m- this is amazing. Absolutely amazing. She’ll love it. Love it! I love it. It’s-"

He turned to look at Sherlock, who was standing with his arms hanging down, looking equal parts excited and lost.

"How did you - how did you do all this? And when? I can’t believe it, it’s totally transformed. A completely new room!"

Sherlock smiled, seemed to relax.

"I got Billy to paint everything and lay the carpet, last week," he smiled. "But the rest, I did myself. It was a relief, actually, to finally get rid of all those papers."

John woke up from his coma like state, and finally drew Sherlock into him, squeezed him hard.

"Thank you," he said. "I can’t tell you how happy this makes me. I’m overwhelmed. This is so amazingly beautiful, Sherlock. Thank you. I love you so much—"

He felt tears coming into his eyes, again, he couldn’t help it. He knew perfectly well what this must have demanded from Sherlock, not only in making it happen but also in making the decision to welcome Anna to Baker Street.

"If you want to-" John began, then hesitated, searching for the right words.

"If you want to, then, with this- I could actually stay here all the time. Only if you want to, of course, I mean, I’d be happy to keep my flat if-"

Sherlock smiled. "That’s what I was hoping for, you know."

Of course, after that, one thing led to another, and then it led to Sherlock’s - no, their - bedroom.

After a wonderful thirty minutes in bed, they managed to get their clothes back on. John scrambled out in the kitchen to make some tea while Sherlock lounged in the sofa, looking very relaxed and very happy. Just as John was feeling, himself.

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John thought he must have dozed off in the sofa, because he was startled by Sherlock coming into back into the sitting room from the kitchen, talking on the phone.

“Sure!” he said in an upbeat tone, and John wondered who he was talking to. It was unusual for Sherlock to be nice on the phone to anyone, really.

“When do you think you'll be here?” Now John turned his head to look at Sherlock. It was already nine o’clock, and he really didn't feel like having visitors over tonight.

Thankfully, he seemed to be in luck.

“Alright, I’ll come down. I'll meet you at the door in five,” Sherlock said, then hung up. John
looked at him, curious. Then he noticed Sherlock's cheeks were flushed pink. Uh-oh.

“It's Gabe,” Sherlock said, and the words sent a massive wave of adrenaline through John's bloodstream. “He's just going to swing by with a, erm, Christmas thingy.”

John hadn't felt jealous at all, really, since they'd gotten together, but now it was suddenly threatening to consume him. He tried very hard to not let it show.

Sherlock looked uncomfortable, and apparently felt the need to keep explaining.

“He always, er, does that. Every Christmas since, I don't know, long time ago. I didn't think it would be appropriate to say he couldn't-” his voice trickled off momentarily, “but if you prefer, I could call him back to say-”

Despite John’s mouth having gone dry and his muscles tensed to the point it threatened to break the coffee mug he had picked up in his efforts to appear relaxed, he still felt bad for Sherlock. Of course he should be allowed to briefly see his ex without having to have a nervous breakdown in front of John.

“No, of course not,” he interrupted, and tried to look as if he meant it. “That would be ridiculous. Of course he should come. He's welcome to come in, too, if you want to invite him up,” said John, intensely praying that wouldn't happen.

Sherlock swallowed audibly. “Thank you,” he said, which made John feel even worse.

“There's no need for you to either thank me or ask for my permission, love,” he said. “Just go downstairs now, so the fella won't have to stand outside in this godawful weather.”

“No, love, I'm pretty sure it's you he wants to see.” John did his best impression of a smile.

He followed Sherlock with his gaze as he made his way towards the door to the flat. Sherlock opened it but didn't close it behind him. It occurred to John that this was a really thoughtful gesture on Sherlock's part, allowing John to hear the interaction.

Just before Sherlock turned the corner on the staircase, John saw him put his hands in his hair to ruffle up the curls, in the same way he always did in front of a mirror. It was such a tiny, harmless thing to do, but it still caused John to clench his hands into tight fists.

To make matters worse, he was then hit with a flashback from that night when he’d let himself in - the night that had started it all. He got a vivid image of Sherlock, sitting in his chair, and- oh fuck. John tried all he could to push this intrusive memory out of his mind.

This didn’t happen often, thank god, but when it did, it was hard. He still hadn’t told Sherlock about it, although he was beginning to suspect that maybe he’d figured something out by now. He’d been relentless in his questions about why John was avoiding Sherlock’s chair, for example.

Maybe at some point, he’d have to tell him. John exhaled, tried to think of something - anything - else.

A minute later, John was standing up in the middle of the sitting room, trying to hear every little piece of the conversation. To his frustration, he couldn't really make out all the words, only got snippets. He heard Gabriel say something, and then heard Sherlock laugh. It wasn’t his fake, routine-interaction laugh, but the soft, genuine one, and John felt like it was hard to breathe.
After what seemed like an eternity, but probably had been less than five minutes, the front door downstairs was shut, and Sherlock came back up again. In his hand, he held a bottle of something. It was unwrapped, but in one of those nice looking wooden crates that finer spirits sometimes came in.

John's stomach turned a little bit when he realized this must have been from where that bottle of expensive Single Malt Scotch had been coming from, every Christmas in the past. He'd happily enjoyed it, never asked from whom it was. He'd always assumed it was from a client, or from Mycroft perhaps.

“He sent his regards,” Sherlock said awkwardly as he put the crate down on the kitchen counter.

John decided something had to be done to try to shake this weird mood. He walked into the kitchen.

“Thanks,” he said, trying his very best to sound pleasant. “So, how is he? I've never asked. Has he, er, met someone?”

Sherlock lit up a bit, and for the first time since he came back up, met John's eyes.

“As a matter of fact, yes, he has. I've known for a while, I just forgot to tell you. You'll like this, John!”

John strongly doubted that he would like anything that had to do with that bloke's love life, but he guessed it was a good thing if he was attached, and not out there somewhere pining for Sherlock.

“Really? Tell me then.”

“He's seeing that actor guy. The one we met that night at the restaurant, remember? They appear to have gotten quite serious, really fast.”

“What, you're kidding?” John couldn't hide his utter surprise. “I thought that guy was married, had a kid!”

Sherlock snickered.

“Ring a bell, John?” he said, with a smile lingering at the corners of his mouth.

John got up to him, put his arms around him. The jealousy was beginning to fade, he was breathing normally again. Sherlock was here, so was he, and it was all good.

Standing there together, John realized that this was what Sherlock had to deal with at least every other week, seeing John and Mary together. Tomorrow, they were going to go for a Christmas Day brunch at Mary’s place, for Anna’s sake, of course. Mary had mentioned that David was going to be there, too, apparently they had reconnected during the summer.

Sherlock had so far not said a word about it, had not complained. John hadn’t given it much thought, either. To him, Mary was a chapter that was closed a long time ago. But maybe it was still a bit difficult for Sherlock? He was going to be more mindful of that, in the future. Be better at showing Sherlock how much he appreciated his efforts.

It occurred to John that this was just how life was, at this point, at this age. This was what real people had in their real lives. Pasts. Ex-wives, ex-boyfriends. New lovers. Kids and dogs with joint custody-
Life was indeed a complex matter and never like in the fairy tales. But here he was, standing in the kitchen of 221B Baker Street, with his arms around the man that he was so fully devoted to; loved without reservation.

John was overcome with an intense rush of happy gratefulness. He was so very grateful for the fact that Sherlock was his, now. That he'd chosen John.

He was also proud. Proud that he had managed to put Sherlock’s well being before his own, so that he could now look back on his actions along the way and still stand tall. Proud that he had done all the difficult things he’d needed to, in order for them to eventually get here, together.

Proud that he had not stopped moving forward, even when times had been at their darkest.

“A kiss would be nice,” Sherlock said, smiling. John must have zoomed out a bit too long in his thoughts. He let his hand caress the nape of Sherlock’s neck, while he reached up to kiss him, and was met with passion and tenderness.

"John Hamish Watson, do you know what?” Sherlock said.

"What?”

"I love you.”

John wasn’t used to hearing Sherlock say this, it had only happened a few times and only recently. He felt tears coming into his eyes. He smiled back.

"William Sherlock Scott Holmes?”

"Yes..?”

"I love you too. Always have and always will.”

Sherlock leaned down, they kissed some more.

"When can we go to Sussex Downs?” Sherlock asked, breaking the kissing.

"Whenever you like, love,” John smiled. "It’s ours now, Janine already emptied it out. We can go when we want to.”

"That’s amazing,” Sherlock said, a dreamy expression in his eyes. John could tell he was already far away in his mind, making plans.

"We’ll need to get furniture,” Sherlock said. "I want a really nice bed! And a big desk. Maybe we should check out those antique stores by the pub? It could be fun!”

John smiled. "Of course, decorating and going antiquing. Isn’t that what any self-respecting, middle aged gay couple ought to be doing in their spare time?”

Sherlock chuckled. "I’m glad you’re finally getting the hang of this thing, John.”

John laughed, pulled him tight against his body.

"I think I might need some more practice, though,” he said. ”At the physical technicalities of being gay, I mean,” and when they kissed again, he grabbed Sherlock’s behind, squeezed it tight.

"If that’s the case,” Sherlock said, "I’d be a fool not to help you.”
"It’s a good thing, then,” John said with a smile before he kissed him again, "that you’re anything but.”
Twenty months later

"What the fuck did people do last night!"

John wasn’t used to hearing Sherlock curse, except sometimes in bed, so this little outburst made him chuckle. He squinted his eyes to the bright morning sunshine.

"Look at this mess, John!" Sherlock was standing in the cottage garden, dressed in a thin robe, barefoot in the dewy grass. His hair was in a state of complete disarray, and he had dark circles under his eyes. John figured he probably looked the same.

"How are we ever going to straighten this up!" Sherlock kept whining.

"Let’s worry about that later, love,” John said. "Come here and have some coffee instead. I made it extra strong."

John watched as Sherlock made his way through the plastic cups, plates, napkins, cigarette butts and empty beer bottles that were scattered all around the lawn and the tables that they’d placed there.

"Good Lord, what is this, then,” Sherlock said and stopped to pick up a black lace bra from one of the shrubs, causing John to laugh again.

"I think it’s a sign that it was one hell of a good party,” he smiled happily.

"You know,” said Sherlock, "really, you should be the one responsible for getting this place back in order, since all of this was your idea in the first place."

"That’s ridiculous! Why is everything always my fault?"

"I don’t know, John, you tell me," Sherlock mumbled and then they both broke out snickering.

They drank their coffee in silence, basked in the lovely warmth of the August morning sun. In a few weeks time, summer would be drawing to a close and they’d move back to Baker Street. But right now, nature in Sussex Downs was really at its peak. Birds singing, an explosion of green everywhere, the bees in the hives already out and working hard.

"It was a lovely speech your mother held,” said John. "Funny and clever. It’s easy to see where you got it from."

"Hmm, yes, I guess it was alright,” said Sherlock. "Harry’s was rather nice, too. And the one your old boss from the hospital gave. I liked her."

John smiled. "Yes, she’s great."

He noticed Sherlock observing him pensively.

"Do you miss it?” he asked. "Do you miss working there?”
It was the first time Sherlock had ever asked him about his decision to quit his job, almost a year ago. He thought about it for a little while.

"To be honest, I don’t," he said. "I mean, I sometimes miss the people there, and I sometimes miss surgery, but no. It all turned into this political circus. That was not what I wanted. I want to be with you, the way it is now."

Sherlock didn’t say anything, just looked at him, thoughtfully.

"Everyone was so nice, yesterday," John said, bringing back the conversation to last night’s events.

"Not Gary, though," said Sherlock, causing John to snort coffee through his nose.

"I think Greg just finally saw his chance to put to use some of those video clips he’s accumulated of you, over the years. It was funny."

"Hmm. Wasn’t funny to me," said Sherlock. Then he hastily turned to look at John.

"Oh no! When are we supposed to be at the brunch?"

"In about an hour and a half," said John. "We’ve got time to sit here for a little while longer. I need to get my strength back. Besides, it’s really beautiful out here today, not counting the mess." He looked around the garden.

"I was thinking, maybe in the autumn, we should expand the deck. Wouldn’t it be nice if it went all the way out to here?"

"Mm, I guess," Sherlock replied. "If you build it on your own. I will not spend another week as your slave, sawing up one million deck boards, that’s for sure."

"Lazy git," John replied. "Maybe I’ll ask your father for help. He could do well with some time away from home, I think."

"Clever thinking, John," said Sherlock. "Just make sure to tell me when, so I can go back to Baker Street."

John looked at him and smiled. Sherlock got up to reach for the thermos, then abruptly sat back down again.

"Ouch, my head," he complained, putting his hands to his temples. "Those waiters just kept refilling my glass. How’s anyone supposed to be able to track their alcohol consumption when they do that?"

"I don’t think one is supposed to, frankly," John smiled. "Besides, I have a very vivid memory of you, sitting on the bed last night, assuring me that you were absolutely not drunk but just ‘a tiny bit tipsy’." John fought an attack of laughter. "And do you remember what you did right after that, love?"

"No. I mean yes. I mean, I did it on purpose. As a joke," Sherlock said grumpily.

"You, my dear," John sniggered, "you fell off the bed. From a sitting position. Just like that." He snorted with laughter. "My poor baby!"

"You’re a horrible person," Sherlock said, but he was fighting the laughter, too. "I got a big bruise actually," and he pulled down his robe to reveal a bluish mark on his shoulder. "Must have hit the
"I’m sorry, sweetheart," John said, feeling a little bit bad now. "But I hope I made it up to you after," he added with a wink.

"You did," said Sherlock, and John was very pleased that he could still get Sherlock to blush once in a while.

"And then! Then I topped you!" Sherlock exclaimed proudly.

John laughed again. "I think it would be more accurate to say that you tried, love," he giggled, causing Sherlock to shove him so hard he almost fell off the garden chair he was sitting in. And that was the thing that completely did John in. He was laughing so much now that it was difficult to breathe.

"But I’ll give you-" he panted heavingly, "-bonus points for effort!"

"You’re insufferable!" said Sherlock, rolling his eyes dramatically. "If you hadn’t been laughing all the time, it would have been a whole lot easier for me to penetrate you!"

It was probably in a large part due to fatigue and the release of the tension that had been building up the weeks leading up to yesterday, but now, John simply could not stop laughing. His abs hurt. Tears were streaming down his face. He just couldn’t stop.

"Pull yourself together, man!" Sherlock complained, but he was giggling, too. "And do tell, because I’m dying to know. Why did you laugh, last night? As far as I know, there is nothing particularly funny with neither me nor my dick?"

John thought that he really needed to try to get a hold of himself to answer this properly.

"No, of course not. No, it wasn’t that. I think your dick is absolute perfection, and you know very well that I enjoyed it when we tried it before," he panted. "It was just that - you know - as I was lying there, the thought occurred to me, that-"

He began to laugh again, gasped for air, tried to find the strength to collect himself enough to finish the sentence.

"I just never imagined that I would be having a dick up my arse on my wedding night, that’s all," he managed to say, before again breaking out in uncontrollable laughter.

Now Sherlock was finally laughing too, not holding back.

"Well, didn’t you get lucky," he sniggered.

"I did, baby," John said softly. He had finally managed to stop laughing, and now turned his head to admire the beautiful, rumpled up man sitting next to him. Gently, he reached out to touch his cheek. "I got luckier than I ever could have dreamt of."

Sherlock looked at him, and John saw so much love in his eyes. It was a miracle, nothing less than a miracle, he thought.

"John?"

"Yes, love?"

"I’m the lucky one here," said Sherlock, and John had to pull him in for a hug. He buried his nose
in his neck and inhaled the familiar scent, felt the soft curls tickle his face.

After a while, John got out of his chair.

"Come on, hubby," he said, offering a hand to help Sherlock up on his feet. 
"It’s time to go get ready for that brunch."

Chapter End Notes

It has really been an amazing experience, to write this fic with the real-time support from you guys. I can't thank you enough for your incredibly generous input; in the form of praise, constructive feedback, funny remarks, kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks and recs. THANK YOU!

If you want to connect, I'm the-seventh-stranger on Tumblr.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!