To the Sticking Place

by blueink3

Summary

Renowned Shakespearean actor Sherlock Holmes has finally burned all of his bridges in the theatre industry save for his constant director, Greg Lestrade. John Watson has made a name for himself in the musical theatre circuit, but age and injury are working against him. Can they reinvent themselves for an all-male Macbeth without killing one another?

Notes

Hallo! First off, before anyone asks, I have read Performance in a Leading Role by the absolutely exquisite MadLori. If you haven't read it yet, you're doing it wrong. This will hopefully have no similarities other than John and Sherlock happen to be actors. Personally, I work in theatre and the idea came to me whilst sitting in an audition room, bored out of my mind. It spiraled out of control from there.

I appreciate any and all feedback, and you can find me on the tumblr at blueink3!
Once More Unto the Breach

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Macbeth:
If we should fail?

Lady Macbeth:
We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking place,
And we'll not fail.

- Macbeth, Act I, Scene 7

After four months, Molly Hooper should be used to how much louder New York is than London, but that transition is going to take a bit more acclimating.

Amidst the honking taxis and yelling delivery men, her arms strain under the weight of five binders full of scripts, casting breakdowns, calendars, set designs, costume specs, and the considerable list of demands from their leading man. She’s known Sherlock Holmes for a while – well, not a while. She’s worked on one other show with him, when Greg was kind enough to bring her onboard, but she’s never actually said a word to him. An impressive feat to pull off, considering she’s the assistant director.

She’s not sure why Greg continues to ask her to assist him on his shows. She read Elizabethan drama at Oxford and her dramaturgical work is impeccable, yet she thinks it has more to do with the way his eyes seem to always find her in a dark theatre, instead of staying on the brightly lit stage and the actors acting upon it.

The thought makes her flush as she passes through the glass revolving door, and her cheeks continue to burn as she moves through the crowded lobby, onto the elevator, and off again on the 16th floor where the room they’ve rented in midtown is located.

Ripley-Grier Studios is bright – too bright with its pink walls and green doors for 10 in the morning, before her coffee has had a chance to kick in. She drops everything on the table and the binders slide across like a plastic cascade of stress. She opens the first and is about to put it in front of Greg, when the bright red markings scribbled across the casting list catch her eye.

“What on earth did he do to this?” she asks, examining the list that just has a giant “NO.” written across the actors’ names, deeming every man on the page unworthy of the role before they’ve even read for the part.

“Added his input,” Greg remarks dryly.

“Lovely,” she breathes, making a mental note to hit the Staples down the block and reprint the lists. “When is Mrs. Hudson getting here?”

“She’s stuck in traffic on Fifth. And you can call her Martha, you know. If she heard you call her Mrs. Hudson, she’d have a cow.”

“Oh to live on the Upper East Side in a penthouse apartment and have a man on retainer to drive me all over this godforsaken city,” Molly groans and Greg raises his eyebrows.
“Feeling homesick, are we?”

“No, just… small. It’s a big place. Doesn’t feel as cozy as London, does it.”

“No, it does not.” He offers her a small smile and squeezes her shoulder as he moves to set up chairs around the table. She tries to pretend like her face hasn’t just flushed scarlet once more.

“This is to discuss casting, yeah? Is Bernie joining?” If so, she realizes quickly that she doesn’t have enough folders.

“No, strictly internal. You, me, Martha, Sherlock, and Irene.” Greg is withholding something, which isn’t exactly news considering this meeting was called at 11:06pm the previous evening without any notion of why. “Martha’s going to float John Watson.”

And Molly bursts out laughing. “As what?”

“Lady M.”

The laughter dies quickly, the idea seeming bold, and yet obvious at the same time. She’d seen him do *Kiss Me, Kate* that summer and it was extraordinary. *He* was extraordinary. And *Shakespeare in the Park* is no easy stage.

But then she thinks of Sherlock and something inside of her dies. “Does he know?”

“Irene’s telling him now.” Greg looks both giddy that the job hasn’t fallen to him and terrified at what’s about to blow through that door.

Molly stares at the table with the kind of resigned horror an actor must feel when they go up on their lines in the middle of a show. “We’re going to need more coffee.”

“And maybe some whiskey.”

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The walls are a garish shade of pink and there are palm trees scattered about, despite the fact that it’s November. And somewhere, between the actors vocalizing in the bathroom and the dancers stretching in any spare studio, Sherlock Holmes is fuming.

“No! No! Absolutely not.”

“Jesus, Sherlock, keep your voice down,” Irene snaps, offering a smile for a group of actresses lining up for a chorus call. “You’re causing a scene.”

“I’m an actor – ”

“You’re a child.”

“– that’s what we do.” Sherlock pauses for breath and his eyes narrow. “Did you just call me a child?”

“You’re goddamn right I did. Now stop making an arse out of yourself in the middle of the biggest studio rental company in New York City and get in the goddamn room.”

He huffs and curses the fates that brought Irene Adler into his life. “Not until you tell me that John Watson is not actually a serious contender for this very important, and quite possibly career-changing production.”
“John Watson is not being considered for Lady M.”

“Are you lying?”

“Of course I’m lying, you berk. Get in there.” She shoves him towards the door labeled 16D and he pauses on the threshold.

“Is this the place that has free chocolates?”

Irene rolls her eyes and gives him another shove. “No that’s the other place.”

“I want the free chocolates.”

“Well you can’t have the free chocolates. Those studios are the next block over and we’ve rented a studio on this block of Manhattan.”

“Pointless,” he mutters, stepping further into the room and greeting Greg and whatshername with a scowl. “Please tell me that Irene accidentally overdid the vodka in her morning orange juice and we aren’t actually considering what I think we’re considering.”

“Don’t you mean ‘whom?’” Irene needles and he really must adjust her pay. She takes entirely too many liberties.

“Yoo hoo!” comes a voice from the door and Martha Hudson pokes her impeccably coifed head in. “Goodness, I’m glad I found the right room. This place is a zoo! I accidentally walked on a yoga class. At least I think it was a yoga class. Those young men are so bendy – ”

“Right.” Greg clears his throat and pulls a chair out for Mrs. Hudson, who gladly takes it, as whatshername mutters “Accidentally” in his ear, causing Greg to choke on his coffee.

Hm. That was nearly clever. He really should learn her name. Mary? Melissa? Megan? Sherlock decides now is not the moment to care and he remains obstinately standing in front of the velvet curtain hiding the mirror behind it.

“We are not going with John Watson.”

“Oh you’ve told him!” Mrs. Hudson claps her hands together as Irene pops her gum.

“Obviously. Only this kind of a strop could be caused by Sherlock Holmes not getting his way.”

He wants to argue against her accusations, but really, she does have a point. “I refuse to step foot on stage with that man.”

“We haven’t even – ” Mrs. Hudson begins as Greg cuts to the chase.

“Why not?”

“He works in musical theatre,” Sherlock spits out, as if he had just revealed that the man had murdered his entire family.

“You’re just jealous because you can’t carry a tune,” Irene mutters as she folds her lithe body into a chair and pulls a binder in front of her. “Really?” she asks, holding up the list with Sherlock’s careful “NO.” written in bright red ink.

“I was being emphatic.”
“You’re being an idiot,” Greg snaps.

“Greg, tell him: is it typical for an actor to have this much input in the casting process?”

“No, it bloody well isn’t.” He lifts his feet off the table and stands, putting his hands on his hips as he moves toward Sherlock. “I welcome your feedback because you’re bloody brilliant, but you’ve got a temper that I just don’t have the patience for. You’ve driven off almost every actor that used to be willing to work with you and now I can’t find someone to take a role that actors should be killing themselves for. It’s career defining. But no one wants to touch it with a ten-foot pole and that’s your fault.”

“My fault?”

“Yes, yours! And you’re going to see John Watson in A Little Night Music tonight if I have to tie your arms to the goddamn chair.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrow in a way that used to make directors piss themselves. “I beg your pardon?”

But Greg merely smiles and pulls two tickets out of his back pocket. “Center orchestra, row G. Bring your wallet because you’re buying dinner, you pompous arse.”

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John squints into the lights as he takes his matinee curtain call, holding tight to Angela on his left and Kelli on his right, smiling as a couple of enthusiastic tour groups let out various whoops and yells to show their appreciation.

The cast breaks formation and he gives one final wave to the audience as he turns towards stage left, arms already opening to catch Sasha, the little girl who plays his daughter, Fredrika. She launches into him and he lifts her handily, groaning only slightly as his shoulder twinges.

“Good show, darling,” he murmurs, carrying her into the wings. It’s a tradition that began after their very first preview, when she had been so excited to complete her first Broadway show that she just catapulted into the arms of the person nearest her. That person happened to be John and she’s been doing it ever since. It caught on so quickly that even Ramona, who plays Fredrika every other performance, has taken to doing it, ensuring John gets an arm workout every time the curtain falls.

“Good show, John,” Aaron offers, as he claps John on the back.

“Cheers. Let’s do it again, shall we?”

Aaron laughs. “Sure, say 8 o’clock?”

“Nah, mate, I’m busy. Got a poker game downtown.” He winks at Sasha as he places her on the floor so they can wind and weave their way backstage without bumping into any wayward set pieces or crew. “Have a good day at school tomorrow,” he calls when they reach her dressing room and she waves and blows him a kiss. He makes a show of catching it and she giggles as she shuts the door.

His own dressing room is one floor up, slightly bigger than the rooms reserved for the ensemble. He shares it with Aaron, who plays the Count, but Aaron has a penchant for hovering near the ladies’ wing of the corridor, which means John usually gets the room to himself on two-show days.

His dresser helps him out of his costume – the multitude of period buttons and snaps a bit much for his post-show muddled mind. “Ta, Nate.”
Nate smiles with a promise to be back by 7pm with his cleaned costume as Harry appears in the doorway.

“Hey, kiddo.”

“Harry, I told you. Not on –”

“– matinee days, I know. I know,” she finishes. “I’m just here to drop off your new prescription, you git. Tom let me hide in the back of the stalls for the final twenty or so. I could see how stiff you were from row Z.”

“Tom needs to stop doing you favors.”

“Tom likes me,” she teases as she sits on the small couch in the room.

“Poor bastard,” John replies, smiling at Harry in the mirror as he wipes his smudged makeup off.

“You were brilliant, Johnny, per usual.”

“I stopped paying you to say that years ago.”

“I know,” is her quiet reply and something inside his chest warms.

And of course, as if sensing the sentimentality, Harry clears her throat and chucks the paper prescription bag at his head. “One per day, with food. Two on two-show days if it’s bad.”

“And it won’t make me loopy?”

“You’re always loopy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He stretches his shoulder and tries and fails to hide a wince.

“Come here..”

“Harry, no.”

“It’s me, or I hire that mean German woman again who worked your muscles so hard, you couldn’t walk for a week.”

“Fine,” he grumbles as he drops onto the floor in front of her feet and chugs a bottle of water, as if only now just registering his thirst.

Harry’s fingers dig into his shoulder, kneading the tight muscles through scar tissue and long-since healed ligaments. “Christ, Johnny, it’s just A Little Night Music. Imagine if it was something more movement heavy, like A Chorus Line.”

John laughs. “I doubt I’ll be doing A Chorus Line anytime soon. I don’t think I could even do A Chorus Line when I was young enough to be in a chorus line.”

“Point. Ow –” she yelps when John smacks her arm.

“You’re supposed to be the supportive sister. The one who says, ‘Of course not, John, you could take the lead in 42nd Street if asked.”

Harry snorts. “Well, we both know that’s not true,” and John hangs his head.
“What’s the point of you?”

Harry shrugs. “I really have no idea. You still have that Tiger Balm stuff I gave you?”

“I do and it smells like shite,” he says, yet he points to his station at the mirror.

“But it works, doesn’t it.” She snatches it up and turns, leaning against his chair as she faces him. And he doesn’t want to admit that she may, in fact, be right about the whole thing, so he remains silent.

Harry’s smile turns from teasing to troubled. “You’re an old man, John Watson.”

He smiles sadly as he stares at his reflection in the mirror opposite – at the lines carving his face and the spark gone from his eyes. At the grey just beginning to fleck the blonde strands on his head. He’s 36. Ancient by musical theatre years and the wear and tear is beginning to show.

“Don’t I know it.”

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Greg pulls the collar of his coat tighter around his neck as he walks down 8th Avenue, thoroughly wishing he had a scarf to keep away the biting November winds. His hotel isn’t far from the theatre district, making his week of meetings and shows an easy commute. When Richard II opens at the National in a few weeks, he’ll be moving into an apartment that the producers of Macbeth are setting up. He can’t bloody wait to finally have someplace to call home.

Joe Allen is a cozy restaurant situated in the middle of what the district calls ‘Restaurant Row’ on 46th between 8th and 9th Avenues, a local haunt of many a theatre professional. Greg gives himself a onceover to make sure the wind hasn’t blown him too much out of place during the walk and he opens the door, flooding the sidewalk with the din of the pre-show crowd.

He spots Sherlock nearly immediately at a table in the back, his tall stature and dark curls easy to find, even in the low lighting. He bobs and weaves his way through the dining room, stopping to shake hands with the owner of the theatre they’ll eventually be moving into before dropping into the seat across from Sherlock and shedding his coat.

“Scared the waitress away?”

“No, but I haven’t ordered a drink yet. Give me time.”

“Let’s try and make it through this one unscathed, yeah?” He remembers a London dinner many moons ago that ended with a glass of chardonnay in his face. Sherlock ended up with a cosmo, so Greg counts himself lucky that his was slightly less sticky and a lot less colorful.

They order a pair of martinis when the waitress does stop by with a flushed glance in Sherlock’s direction, eventually deciding on the filet mignon for himself as Sherlock orders the salmon.

“Are we really going through with this farce?” he asks, and Greg grins because he’s been waiting for some form of that question since this morning.

“We are. And you’re going to enjoy it. Angela’s in it and you love Angela.”

“I can’t say that the feeling’s mutual. She’s hated me ever since I stepped on her train in The Importance of Being Earnest and sent her flying into the fake shrubbery.”
Greg chokes on his martini and dabs at his mouth with his napkin. “Hate’s a strong word.”

“And yet sorely apt.”

“I didn’t think it was possible for Mrs. Potts to hate anyone.”

Sherlock frowns. “Mrs. Potts? Who the hell is Mrs. Potts?”

Greg shakes his head and steals a roll from the basket in the middle of the table. “It wouldn’t kill you to sit down and watch a children’s film every now and then.”

“It might.”

The rest of the meal passes without much incident; they stick to safe subjects such as The National’s new season, odd Americanisms, and why on earth the West End is choosing to remount another Hamlet.

“You could say the same of The Scottish Play,” Greg throws out and Sherlock scoffs. “You’re just tetchy because you and Jude Law did Hamlet at the same time – ”

“On separate continents.”

“ – and he got the better reviews,” Greg finishes as Sherlock glares. The waitress clears their plates and Greg rests his elbows on the table, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Sherlock, I’m going to level with you. No one wants to work with you.”

“You do.”

“Because I’m an idiot – as you’ve said on multiple occasions.”

Sherlock shrugs. “You have your moments.”

Greg sighs and eats the olive out of his martini. “Maybe I’m just a glutton for punishment.” And Sherlock still doesn’t seem to get the seriousness of the problem. He can’t seem to grasp just how far he’s fallen in the industry and how his name alone is enough to drive away both fellow artists and investors. “Christ, Sherlock, you’re 34. Young by Shakespearean standards – hell, Jacobi’s 76 – but those opportunities are dwindling for you. I can’t be the first to tell you. I know Irene’s brought it up.”

Sherlock remains silent, picking at a wayward thread on the tablecloth.

“I need you to do this for me. Martha wants John Watson and right now, she’s the only one who’s willing to put any money on you.”

“Macbeth is my golden fleece.”

“I know it is,” Greg reasons. “And I’m trying to put together the best possible production for you. But I need you to let me do my job and maybe, just maybe, trust me a bit. After ten years together, I think I’ve earned that much.”

Sherlock is silent for a moment, but he finally nods, the closest he’ll ever get to acquiescence and the weight in the pit of Greg’s stomach lightens somewhat. He signals for the check and they make their way out of the restaurant and down a block to the theatre on 45th.

The bulbs of the old marquees light up the sky over the theatre district, proudly displaying the names
of the shows and the people currently pounding the boards. Greg inhales deeply, soaking up the energy of the audiences making their way into their respective theatres as he and Sherlock stroll towards the brightly lit sign for *A Little Night Music*.

“The Music Box,” Sherlock murmurs as they walk up to the door. “I did *Godot* here.”

“I remember. You were just a young punk and you were the most brilliant Lucky I’d ever seen.”

“Don’t sound so wistful,” Sherlock snaps with a glint in his eye. “My good days aren’t entirely behind me.”

And Greg laughs because he likes this Sherlock. The Sherlock who’s aware of how much of an arse he can be and uses self-deprecation as a bonding mechanism.

Sherlock snags a spare Playbill as they make their way through the lobby and examines the headshots. “Bit small for Sondheim, isn’t he?”

“You can get his height from his headshot?”

“Obviously.”

Greg shakes his head as they enter the theatre, taking their admittedly fantastic seats in the center of the orchestra. “Who’d you have to kill for these? This is hardest ticket to get on Broadway at the moment.”

“I’m surprised you know that.”

Sherlock shrugs, ignoring the stares of a pair of middle-aged women further down their row. “I did some research.”

The lights dim and the ushers do a final sweep of the aisles, asking people to turn off their cell phones just as the orchestra kicks in with the overture. And Greg can’t help the smile on his face as the voices swell, risking a glance at Sherlock and finding a look on his leading man’s face that seems to scream, “BORED.”

Greg ignores him and settles in, letting the music and the story carry him away from the chaos of the city, if only for a few hours.

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Despite what Greg no doubt thinks, Sherlock spends the next two-plus hours absolutely rapt. And from the first time the lawyer who holds himself like a soldier enters, Sherlock can concentrate only on him.

John Watson’s first song is a masterclass of control, Sondheim’s lyrics being a workout for even the most studied linguist, and Sherlock is pretty sure he doesn’t draw breath for the entirety of it. The fact that it’s four minutes long proves truly troublesome for his lungs. Nor can he explain his hatred for the young ingénue playing opposite the man onstage. Granted, Sherlock’s never really had much time for simpering, but this feeling in the pit of his gut is getting a tad out of control.

When Watson's character Frederik meets up with his ex-lover Desiree to discuss his new (much younger) wife, the rapid fire dialogue is quick and witty and sardonic, all things that Sherlock claims he himself is superior at. But John Watson’s comedic timing is impeccable and his command of the stage unparalleled. He seems to dwarf men who have at least half a foot on him.
Before Sherlock knows it, the lights are coming back up for intermission and, feigning indifference (a losing battle if there ever was one), he allows Greg to buy him a vodka soda, which he proceeds to sip while trying for the remainder of act two to keep his eyes off of the actor delivering a tour de force in front of him.

But it’s a pointless endeavor, though. Again and again, his focus is drawn to the relatively diminutive man with a hell of a talent as he attempts to navigate the romantic entanglements his character has gotten himself into. And now here they are at the end, and Sherlock knows that they’re about to do a reprise of “Send in the Clowns,” one of his favorite musical theatre songs of all time (though he’d die before admitting it).

“Frederik? Frederik!” The woman playing Desiree (Kerri? Kelli?) throws herself on top of John after a botched attempt at Russian Roulette and, under normal circumstances, Sherlock would no doubt audibly sneer, but all he feels right now is… sympathy. With perhaps a dose of jealousy? Oh that just will not do. He shifts in his seat, but he can’t tear his gaze away from the scene before him as John-as-Frederik sits up in his lover’s arms.

“Extraordinary, isn’t it? To hold a muzzle to one’s temple, and yet to miss. A shaky hand perhaps is an asset after all.”

But Sherlock can already tell that John’s hands don’t shake. Not when it counts. The music begins and Sherlock sucks in a breath.

“Isn’t it rich?”

“Aren’t we a pair?
Me here at last on the ground.”

“You in mid-air.”

He’s crumpling the Playbill in his hand, but it can’t be helped. He needs something to hold onto and it sure as hell won’t be Greg’s hand.

“How unlikely life is to lose one’s son, one’s wife, and practically one’s life within an hour. And yet to feel relieved,” John-as-Frederik smiles and touches Desiree’s jaw. He speaks of their future life together, the life they should have begun so many years ago, and Sherlock bites his lip as John’s voice breaks. “After so many years of muddle, you…” he takes her hand and presses it to his chest, “and me…” he presses his to hers, “… and of course… Fredrika.”

And damn it all, that part has always gotten him. The part when Frederik reveals that he’s known Fredrika’s been his child all along (and really, the name should have been a dead giveaway – how moronic are these Swedes?). But still, a tear tracks down his cheek, coming to the precipice of his chin and he daren’t wipe it away lest Greg see.

The music swells drowning out his audible swallow as he bows his head, unable to glance at the stage anymore. He’s not sure what happens in the final scene, presumably it ends happily – it is a musical after all – but his head is so full of that glorious melody, he can only stare at the shredded paper in his lap and wonder how the hell he let himself get here.

Before he knows it, people are clapping and standing. He does so automatically, though perhaps the nudge from Greg helps, and he desperately tries not to make eye contact with John Watson as he takes his bow.

He fails.
Blue eyes clap onto blue and the corner of John’s mouth quirks a bit in recognition before he focuses on his conductor, giving the man his just recognition. The little girl playing Fredrika then jumps into her show-father’s waiting arms and is carried offstage, away from Sherlock’s studious gaze. And for some reason, he feels bereft.

Greg whistles lowly. “That was bloody brilliant.”

But before Greg can turn to Sherlock or ask what he thought or do anything at all that would require a verbal answer, the actor bolts from the theatre without so much as a glance backwards, losing his director in a sea of smiling faces.

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John high fives Kelli as he passes her on the way to his dressing room, already dreaming of paracetamol – or acetaminophen as it’s widely known here – and at least three fingers of scotch. Those are the only things getting him out of his costume at the moment.

He tosses a goodbye to Aaron as he slips on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and he’s just downed the last of his water as a knock sounds at the door.

“Mr. Watson? There’s a Greg Lestrade here to see you.”

“Tom, I keep telling you: it’s John. And send him on in.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Watson.” Tom, the burly house manager, steps aside, revealing Greg who’s already sporting an ebullient smile.

“Holy hell, John. I knew you were good, but jesus.”

“Ta very much,” he manages, blushing slightly, and gestures for Greg to take a seat on the couch. “It was good of you to come.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it. Though I can’t believe I’ve only caught you in one other besides this.”

“Oh? Which?”

“Guys and Dolls about five years ago.”

John chuckles and rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, that was a good production. I’ve been staying on this side of the pond mainly. Ever since My Fair Lady.”

He only played Freddie, but it was still the show that launched his career. That got him on the list of every casting director’s call sheet. Usually at the top.

Greg is looking at the various knick-knacks and paraphernalia that have made their way onto the mirrors and walls and John takes a moment to study him. To catalogue the tension in his shoulders and the dark circles under his eyes. John can’t blame him; the man is putting up a show in London while also trying to do pre-production on an all-male Macbeth with only the most difficult actor in the business.

Sherlock Holmes.

John would know that face anywhere, even in a sold-out house with the front lights blinding him, and he acutely notices his absence now.

“So I assume this is more than just a courtesy call,” he begins, cutting right to the chase and Greg
practically winces.

“Yeah listen, mate. Your agent mentioned you were offer only – ”

“Mike thinks very highly of me,” John interrupts because he’s been to this rodeo before. “But I know I’m no one’s first choice for Shakespeare.”

“You’re Martha Hudson’s,” Greg points out and John ducks his head.

“That’s nice of her, but I’ll read for it. Despite what Mike says. He means well, but how else are you going to know whether or not I can do the part?”

Greg nearly sags with relief and John’s glad the man’s already sitting. “Thanks, John. Thanks very much. I’d invite you out for a drink now, but I know two-show days can be a bit rough.”

‘A bit rough’ is an understatement. He can feel every scene and song in every joint in his body at the moment. “Yeah, maybe dinner though? Sunday night after the matinee?”

“Perfect. We’ll discuss the concept and schedule a time for you to come in and read.” Greg stands and shakes his hand, and John tries to bite his tongue – truly he does – but as Harry says, he’s always been a bit of a moron.

“Was that Sherlock Holmes I saw with you in the audience?”

Greg hesitates just a fraction of a second, giving John all the answer he needs. “Yeah, but he had to run. Hot date or something.”

John’s smile is tight but he’s not a Broadway actor for nothing. “Right. Well, cheers. Tell him I said thanks for coming.”

“Will do,” Greg replies and then he’s gone.

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But Sherlock hasn’t left and won’t for a good long while. He remains standing in the alley connecting 44th and 45th Streets, the late autumn wind whipping by him, wondering what on earth John Watson just did to him.

Chapter End Notes

- Ripley-Grier Studios actually exists and, yes, it really is that garish.
- Pearl Studios (down the block) is the one with the free chocolates. It's awesomesauce.
- "Bernie" is actually a real person. Bernie Telsey owns one of the premiere casting agencies in the city.
- Shakespeare in the Park is a thing produced by The Public Theatre in the middle of Central Park. It's amazing and if you're in New York in the summertime, it's a must-see.
- A Little Night Music is written by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler. If you listen to nothing else, listen to "Send in the Clowns."
- "Angela" is Angela Lansbury. She actually played the role of Madame Armfeldt in A Little Night Music back in 2009. And since she's immortal, she can play it again now.
- "Kelli" is Kelli O'Hara, an absolutely phenomenal musical theatre actress. She starred in South Pacific, The Light in the Piazza, and The Bridges of Madison County.
- Joe Allen is a real restaurant. It's fancy and yummy.
- Jude Law did play Hamlet back in 2009. I honestly can't remember if the reviews were good and I'm too lazy to look them up.
- "Jacobi" is Derek Jacobi. Obvi.
- The Music Box is a theatre located on 45th St between 8th and Broadway.
A Walking Shadow, A Poor Player

Chapter Summary

“Sherlock isn’t reading with me?” John asks and Greg stops texting.

“Sherlock doesn’t read with anyone. Don’t take it personally.”

John is quiet for a moment. “He doesn’t like me, does he?”

“He doesn’t like anyone, you said so yourself.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


\begin{quote}
\textit{Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player}
\textit{That struts and frets his hour upon the stage}
\textit{And then is heard no more.}

- Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5
\end{quote}

Molly tries to keep herself from skipping down the hall not only because she’s precariously holding two Starbucks cups and three bags, but also because she’s in one of the fanciest hotels in midtown Manhattan. Skipping just would not do.

She eventually arrives at room 1405 and gives a perky knock on the door. It swings back a moment later, revealing a sleep rumpled Greg, squinting one eye open and trying to rub the pillow lines from his face.

“I thought I said 9am.”

“It is 9am,” she responds, looking everywhere but at him, wordlessly holding out the cup of coffee.

“Really?” he asks as he takes it and swigs, promptly cursing at the hot liquid burning his tongue.

“Yes. Didn’t you change your watch?”

He steps back and wordlessly ushers her into the room. “Figured I’d be able to count backwards five hours easy enough.”

“Clearly not,” she mutters, passing by him and shrugging out of her coat. “So, how was last night?”

“Good,” he murmurs as he shuts the door and it seems to take him a minute before he realizes what exactly she’s asking. “Oh the show?” He immediately perks up as his eyes alight with the kind of glow she rarely sees outside of the rehearsal room. “ Bloody brilliant. John’s… he’s not the obvious choice, but I think he could be the right one.”

She nods, because after a careful day and night of contemplation, she agrees.

“And it’d be good to have someone like him in the rehearsal room. He seems to have both feet on the ground.”
She watches with a small smile on her face as Greg begins to pace, not really even talking to her anymore – just to the room at large.

“He’d physically be a good match for him. He’s diminutive, but his presence is… blimey. He could go toe-to-toe with Sherlock Holmes and win, of that I have no doubt.”

“Greg.”

“Hm?”

“You know you’re saying all that out loud, right?”

“What? Oh.” He rubs the back of his neck and takes another sip of his coffee. “Getting a little ahead of myself, aren’t I.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “You go with your gut. I’ve always admired that about you.”

Now it’s his turn to flush, the red hue of his skin contrasting even more so with the white of his t-shirt. “John and I are grabbing dinner on Sunday after his show. We’ll schedule a time to read sometime next week.”

“Let me know when and I’ll schedule a studio and a reader.”

“Cheers.”

She sets up her laptop on the small desk in the hotel room and plugs it into the wall, avoiding the question she’s so desperate to ask. But when everything’s up and running, she realizes she has nothing else to do with her hands.

“So… how’d – how’d Sherlock like it?”

“Sherlock?” Greg shrugs. “Bolted before I could ask. God knows what’s going on in that brilliant and brilliantly thick skull of his.”

“He liked him,” she blurts out and Greg’s head shoots up so quickly, she’s positive he must have cricked something.

“What?”

“Well, if Sherlock doesn’t like something, he lets everyone, and I mean everyone, know. If he just bolted, as you said, he likely was surprised by John and his performance and didn’t know how to deal with being so… wrong.”

Greg’s mouth hangs open, the coffee resting precariously in his loose grip. “How do you know that and I, who’ve known him for decades, don’t?”

She gives a helpless shrug. “Sometimes it takes a fly on the wall.”

His face splits into a grin that could light up a stage. “Molly Hooper, I could kiss you.”

She absolutely, positively, does not squeak.

xxxxxx

“Sherlock, open the damn door.”
“Go away!”

Irene sighs, tucking the copy of *The New York Times* under her arm and taking a sip of Sherlock’s cappuccino. “I’ll just stay out here, shall I? I’ve got your paper and your incredibly overpriced coffee. I can make myself at home just fine.”

The door across the hall from Sherlock’s opens and the neighbor, Christopher, gives her a friendly nod as he grabs his own paper. Luckily for Sherlock, Christopher is used to these early morning shenanigans.

“I know where the extra key is. Spare me the indignity of using it.”

Leave it to Sherlock to hide his in a Hummel figurine that’s been shoved into a potted plant on the floor. Irene has absolutely no desire to search for it under a frankly terrifying ceramic statue of a child in lederhosen.

The door swings open before she can get soil under her perfectly manicured nails and Sherlock stands there, hair a wild halo around his head, blue dressing gown fluttering with his sudden movements. “This is not me giving into your demands. This is me desperately wanting my cappuccino.” He snatches the drink out of her hand and she manages to get her body in the doorway before he has a chance to slam it on her.

“Good morning to you, too.”

His Upper West Side flat looks more like it belongs in the Marylebone district than among the stay-at-home, pearl-wearing mums with their $2,000 strollers and the power brokers with their martini-filled expense lunches. The rooms are dark, the windows overlooking the park and reservoir draped in heavy curtains. The walls are adorned with patterned wallpaper – nothing quite as drastic as the walls in his London flat, but close. Anything to get a taste of home.

She runs her finger along one of his many wooden bookshelves and tuts when it comes away dusty. “Slacking, are we?”

“The woman was supposed to come and clean. I cancelled.”

“She has a name, you know.”

“The clutter helps me think.”

“The clutter makes you trip.”

He waves her away with a flick of his hand as he flops dramatically into his chair.

“What’s got you in such a strop?”

“The Work.”

“You’ve got a job,” she reminds him, pointing to the towering stack of *Macbeth* editions and Shakespearean criticism that’s threatening to take over the better half of the room.

“It doesn’t start for weeks. And we still don’t have a leading man. Woman. Whatever.”

Irene practically cackles. “That’s not what I hear. And I think that might be the first time I’ve ever heard the word ‘whatever’ pass your lips.”

“I pay you to get me jobs. I don’t pay you to have a running commentary,” he snaps and she perches
on the arm of the chair opposite him, crossing her impeccably heeled feet in front of her.

“You actually don’t pay me at all. Your brother pays me to keep you as my only client, and let me tell you, I’m beginning to regret the seven-figure sum he gives me on a yearly basis. And for someone who enjoys the finer things as much as I do, that’s saying something.” She touches what remains of the shredded *A Little Night Music* Playbill and raises her perfectly shaped eyebrows at him. “Enjoyed it that much, did we?”

“Piss off.”

“Now, now. Play nice.” She picks it up from the coffee table and casually thumbs through it, pausing on the page containing the headshots of the company. “Well isn’t he delicious. It’s a good thing I’ve got my ticket for Sunday.”

“Irene,” he growls before jumping up and pacing like a caged tiger. And it’s not the fact that he’s acting like some horrid combination between a feral cat and a cranky brat that has the Playbill falling forgotten to her lap; it’s that he’s said her name at all.

It’s always, “You there,” or perhaps just a wave of the hand. It’s not “Irene.” Never “Irene.”

“Sherlock,” she murmurs, sliding from the arm into the chair and he finally comes to a stop in front of her.

“This has the potential to be very, very bad,” he finally admits and she cocks her head, thoroughly confused.

“I spoke to Greg this morning. He was thrilled. You two did see the same show last night, didn’t you?”

“We did. And that’s exactly the problem,” he groans, flopping back down in his chair once more. She glances from his pinched face to his tapping fingers and dancing feet. “I don’t follow.”

“Shakespeare is a whole different beast, but I know what I saw on that stage last night. John Watson is good. And that gives me hope and hope is a horrible thing.”

Irene chuckles and crosses her arms, leaning back against the leather as she studies the enigma before her. “If this whole acting thing falls through, steer clear of writing greeting cards, yeah?”

He cracks a smile and she ticks a check mark on an imaginary scorecard in her mind.

“Sherlock, I get that this is scary. That potentially your whole career is riding – ”

“Easy does it,” he interrupts, looking far more panicked than he’ll ever let on.

“Don’t you want a partner up there with you?” she asks. “An equal?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer, but she knows she has him because if there’s anything Sherlock cares about, it’s The Work.

And if Irene got him to care about another human being the way he throws himself into the job, she’d consider her life’s work a great success. Maybe even refuse Mycroft’s payment for a year. Maybe.
Greg will meet you at the stage door at 6pm.
Oh this is Molly, his AD, btw.

John chuckles as he glances at the screen, before pocketing his phone and stepping onto the subway car. The 1 train is a quick ride from Christopher Street to Times Square and he listens to an NPR podcast to help pass the time, occasionally sipping the Throat Coat tea in his travel mug. He tries to stay on vocal rest when he’s not onstage, which makes for a pretty empty social calendar. Still, he’s in the middle of at least five different mystery novels and Broadway.com has him writing a blog. He has an entry due on Tuesday that he hasn’t even begun. But tomorrow is Monday and that means a day off. He can easily bullshit something about how exciting the life of an actor is over his morning coffee.

“This is Times Square, 42nd Street. Please stand away from the closing doors.”

John follows the ebb and flow of the crowd, doing everything in his power to keep his blood pressure at a normal level. It’s not easy, in the middle of the busiest subway station in the world surrounded by people who have absolutely no idea where they’re going, but if he keeps his head down and his cap pulled low, he can almost pretend he’s somewhere else.

A light snow has begun to fall while he was underground and he finds that the precipitation gives the city a kind of ethereal glow. Granted, it’ll all turn to dirty slush in a few hours, but he pauses on the sidewalk to enjoy it while he can.

“Looking forward to the show.”

“I beg your pardon?” he glances behind him and sucks in a breath at the woman standing before him. She’s petite but by no means a pushover – he can tell that from the get go. Her brunette hair is pulled back in a severe up-do and her lips are as red as blood, standing out starkly against the white that falls around them.

“The show.” She gestures in the direction of the theatre with a glint in her eye. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Oh… well,” he shuffles his feet, still not used to being recognized on the street, “I hope we don’t disappoint.”

“Oh I’m sure you won’t.” She offers him a downright salacious grin before turning on her heel and tossing a “Break a leg!” over her couture-draped shoulder.

He stares after her for a moment, eyes firmly fixed on her back and not lower, before shaking his head and making his way to the stage door. If he’s learned one thing about New York, it’s that it’s never short on eccentricities.

He greets Tom on his way in and goes through his routine once he gets to his dressing room: vocal warm-ups, a bit of yoga, a lot of wincing. He rubs some of the crap that Harry gave him on his shoulder, opening the window so Aaron doesn’t complain about the smell, even though it’s below freezing out.

He’s long since forgotten about his scar and it usually doesn’t come up until he shares a dressing room with a new occupant and they inevitably comment on the grooves and whorls of his skin. Some try to guess at his background; have heard stories or read a blog post - he’s managed to keep it
out of official interviews. Others are completely unaware and he’s more than happy to brush it off with a “car accident” or some other every day, pedestrian occurrence. He’d been lucky with Aaron. He’d neither stared nor asked. The entire interaction between John’s shoulder and Aaron’s attention had been a complaint about the smell of the balm, which John can’t really fault him for.

He’s still smiling over that thought when the man himself bounds in and plops a pile of what looks like tongue depressors on the table with a little ragdoll on top.

“What the hell is this?”

“It’s November 5th,” Aaron replies, quite proud of himself. “Your very own bonfire. I know it’s a bigger deal over there than it is here, but who’s to say we can’t get in touch with our inner pyromaniacs?”

John chuckles and turns the glued-together mass in his hands. “That’s sweet, Aaron, but I really don’t think that accidentally setting the theatre on fire will go over well. With Tom or with the old ladies in the front row.”

Aaron cocks his head to the side, as if considering and then conceding the point. “Closing night, then. Mr. Fawkes will stay here until such a time is convenient.”

With a nod of finality, he claps John on the back and bounds out as quickly as he came. And John can’t help but admit that he’ll miss him when all this is over.

“Fifteen minutes, ladies and gentlemen. This is your fifteen minute call,” the intercom blares and he finds himself murmuring “Thank you, fifteen,” though no one is around to hear him. Old habits.

Fifteen becomes five, and five becomes places. And the next thing John knows, he’s walking out onstage for his eighth performance that week, feeling the familiar jolt of adrenaline that no caffeine fix can bring.

Two and a half hours pass by in a blur and by the time the curtain comes down, John wants nothing more than to kick back in his flat with a glass of scotch and good book. But then he remembers he has dinner with Greg Lestrade and his stomach jolts with the kind of anxiety he hasn’t felt since opening night.

“Big plans on the day off?” Aaron asks as he pulls his jacket on and John shakes his head.

“My big plans are no plans at all. And I can’t wait.”

“I hear ya. Have a good one!”

“Cheers, you too,” he calls as Aaron leaves, and he chuckles once more at the makeshift bonfire on his station.

He eventually winds his way down the various stairs of the theatre, nodding to Herb, the security guard in charge of the stage door. Screams and cheers overwhelm him as he exits and he remembers that if one is ever in need of an ego boost, one need only exit the stage door. He smiles as a few cameras flash and he pulls a sharpie out of his bag, heading over to the end of the metal barrier to work his way up. He accepts various compliments and takes a few photos, signing Playbills and cracking jokes with the people who’ve chosen to wait out in the snow. The least he can do is be pleasant about it.

He spots Greg hovering towards the back with a wry smile on his face and he waves. “Just a sec, Greg!”
“Take your time,” the director calls back. “I’m not one to stand between a man and his adoring public.”

The crowd chuckles and a few cheer, and John makes a show of rolling his eyes yet he continues down the line until everyone who’s been waiting has gotten what they want. He’s about to turn and offer Herb a final goodbye when he comes face to face with the mysterious woman from before.

“Ah, hello again. I trust you weren’t disappointed?” he asks, and she fixes him with a look that could melt snow in Antarctica.

“I could eat you with a spoon.” She slides a card into his front coat pocket and gently tugs at his lapels, smirking a bit before letting him go.

“… Right,” is all he manages before she turns and disappears into the night, leaving John wondering what the hell just happened.

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“Everything all right?” Greg asks as he approaches and John blinks dumbly, staring at something in the distance.

“Yeah, I just had the oddest encounter. Some mysterious woman just told me she could eat me with a spoon. Then she gave me her card, but…” he turns it over. “There’s no name.”

He shows it to Greg, who barks out a laugh. “That’s Irene Adler. Sherlock’s agent.”

“His agent?”

“More like his handler. If she gave you her card, she’s a fan. Oh and she expects you to call.”

“For what?”

“Well, that’s the million pound question, isn’t it.” He winks and nods in the direction of the restaurant, and John has no choice but to gape and follow.

They’re taken through the bar and up half a flight of stairs to a table in the back. The maître d is already bringing over a bottle of wine before they’ve even taken their seats and Greg realizes just how much he’s missed this place.

“Mr. Lestrade! It’s been too long.”

“Daniel,” he greets as he shakes his hand. “You’ll be seeing a lot more of me soon, I promise.” He’s spent many a post-show drink in this establishment and he expects he’s just found his new drinking buddy, if all goes according to plan. “Have you met John Watson? John, this is Daniel O’Byrne, he runs this place.”

“I’m a big fan,” Daniel offers and John smiles as he takes his hand.

“Likewise. If I could stay away from the risotto balls you offer here, my costume designer would be a lot happier.”

Daniel pops the bottle open with a grin and lets it breathe as Greg and John settle.

“Not to jump right into business,” Greg begins, “but did Molly get you the sides?”

“She did. Some easy scenes you’ve picked out for me, I see,” he replies ruefully.
“Don’t be intimidated by them. This is going to be very informal. Relaxed.”

And at that reassurance, John seems to do just that. He eases back into his chair and sips the wine that Daniel has poured for them, breathing deeply and letting his shoulders drop. Greg’s seen that decompression before – has made his actors leave a room if only to unwind from the stress that can hover in a rehearsal.

John glances at his menu, saying his next words to the book in his hands and not the director across the table. “To be perfectly honest, I figured you’d go with someone along the lines of James Moriarty.”

Greg quirks an eyebrow and ignores his menu, already knowing what he wants. “Trust me, I’d be lying if I said he wasn’t gunning for the role, but Sherlock doesn’t get along with him,” he replies and John laughs.

“Does he get along with anyone?”

“Sometimes. If you play your cards right.” Greg sighs and swirls the wine in his glass, the candle on the table making pink light dance on the cloth. “Honestly, I don’t want someone like Jim Moriarty in my rehearsal room. I’ve got my hands full enough with Sherlock, but I at least know how to handle him. Jim is…”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the stories,” John offers. “Didn’t believe half of them.”

“It’s probably the half that’s true,” Greg mutters and takes a sip of his wine, leaning forward and placing his elbows on the table. “Look, I know you’ve got a full plate and I don’t want to pressure you, but I’ve got to head back to London soon – ”

“I can read tomorrow if you’d like,” John interrupts and Greg is absolutely speechless. He truly thought he was going to have to beg for Tuesday, not get Monday offered up on a silver platter.

“Seriously? You’ve had time to prepare?”

John shrugs. “A bit. But honestly, I think I’m better when my head’s not as involved.”

“I hear ya there.” He leans back and grabs his phone. “Don’t mean to be rude, but I want to let Molly know that she’ll have to book a room and a reader. What time works for you? I assume later is better? Give you the morning?”

“Sherlock isn’t reading with me?” John asks and Greg stops texting.

“Sherlock doesn’t read with anyone. Don’t take it personally.”

John is quiet for a moment. “He doesn’t like me, does he.”

“He doesn’t like anyone, you said so yourself.”

“Greg.”

He puts the phone down and shifts in his seat, forcing himself to meet John’s gaze. “Honestly? He wasn’t too keen on the idea, only because he’s never seen you do something like this before. Sherlock has… trust issues. And he’s putting a lot of faith into this project and I don’t think he’s entirely convinced that we’re going to pull it off. It has him very on edge.” He takes another sip of wine, letting the tang of the cabernet glide over his tongue. “It’s not you, John. Frankly, I don’t know what’s going on with him. He bolted so quickly after your show and I haven’t heard from him since.
That is… unlike him, to say the least.” He doesn’t want to reveal too much because he’s always felt oddly protective of Sherlock, yet John’s expression has shifted to one of understanding and, after a tense moment, he nods and leans back.

“Okay. Noon tomorrow, shall we say?”

Greg raises his glass and clinks it against John’s.

“Noon it is.”

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Sherlock breezes through the glass doors and nods at the security guard, having already called ahead and impersonated Greg to put himself on the list. The guard seems to recognize him though (Has he rehearsed here before? Maybe? Doesn’t matter.) and he beats a hasty retreat up the stairs to the sixth floor, ensuring he’s plenty winded by the time he gets to the correct studio.

Muffled voices are filtering in through the cracked doorway, presumably Greg’s, Molly’s, Mrs. Hudson’s, John’s and whichever subpar actor they’ve gotten to read today. Taking a deep breath to fortify himself, but not really because Sherlock Holmes doesn’t need fortification, he breezes through the door and all conversation abruptly stops.

“Oh,” John murmurs. “Hi.”

“Hiya.” Greg tilts his head and steps away from John, attempting to ask Sherlock with a look what the hell he’s doing here. Sherlock ignores him and strides up to the reader.

“Thank you so much for coming in, but your services won’t be needed today.”

“Um…” the boy glances between Sherlock and Greg and, after a moment, Greg nods.

“Thanks, AJ. Molly’ll be in touch tomorrow and get you all paid up for the hour.”

The boy, AJ, shrugs. “No problem. John, nice to meet you,” he offers, shaking John’s hand and that just will not do. Sherlock glowers at him until he has the good sense to leave.

“Sherlock, dear, we didn’t expect you today.” Mrs. Hudson flits around him and he lets her press a kiss to his cheek with a tight smile.

“Yes, well. Had nothing better to do.”

He’s resolutely avoiding looking anywhere to his right because he can practically feel the gaze of John Watson boring into his skull like a drill. It’s both unpleasant and necessary. He focuses on Molly’s untied trainer instead.

“Here – here are the sides, if you’d like to take a look,” Molly stutters, handing him a packet of stapled papers over which he gives a cursory glance.

“Noted,” he snaps as he hands them back.

“You – you don’t need the sides?”

“I have these memorized already.” He removes his coat and drapes it over the back of his chair, unbuttoning the cuffs of his aubergine shirt and rolling them up mid-forearm. “Shall we?” He plops into a chair to the side as Greg and company hesitantly take their seats behind the table.
“John? You good?” Greg asks, and only then does Sherlock deign to glance up.

He thoroughly wishes he hadn’t.

John is staring at him and his look is a lance, cutting through skin and tissue and muscle and bone, down to the beating organs beneath. Sherlock swallows and wishes he had the papers in his hand, just to have something to pretend to study.

“Would you prefer me to sit or stand?” John asks after a moment, pointing to the chair that’s been placed nearby for him.

“Whatever’s most comfortable,” Greg responds.

“I think I’ll stand for the first one.” John moves the proffered chair to the side and clears his throat a few times, loose-leaf paper remaining curled up in his fist.

He looks small in the harshly lit room with its overhead lighting and floor to ceiling windows, but then something changes. His feet come together, his shoulders kick back and his head snaps up with the kind of military precision only an ex-soldier can perfect.

And it’s beautiful.

Sherlock’s thankful the beginning of this first side is a monologue because he’s honestly not sure he’d be able to form coherent sentences at the moment, Shakespearean or otherwise.

“They met me in the day of success, and I have learned by the perfect’st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished.”

John reads the letter as Lady Macbeth with a kind of contained zeal that foreshadows things to come and yet with a grace Sherlock thought him incapable of. It’s not feminine, but it’s close, framed by the kind of strength inherent in a character like Lady M. To make a crude correlation, if musical theatre is tap or jazz, then Shakespeare is ballet. And right now, John Watson is navigating the text like a principal at ABT.

He’s basically off-book, which is impressive in and of itself. The man’s already got a whole musical memorized in his head and he’s managed to shove a bit of Shakespeare on top of it.

“How thee hither,
that I may pour my spirits in thine ear
and chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
to have thee crowned withal.
What is your tidings?”

It takes Sherlock a second to remember that’s his cue and he curses the crack in his voice when he replies, “The King comes here tonight.” He’s only reading the lines of the servant, but when he comes in as Macbeth, his entire demeanor changes. Theirs is a short first scene, but it’s enough to know that this dynamic works.

“Only look up clear.
To alter favour ever is to fear.
Leave all the rest to me.”
“Great work, John,” Greg says after a moment, and the soldierly façade falls away from the other man as he nods back with a small smile.

“Next side?” he asks, gaze flicking to Sherlock and Sherlock knows why. It’s their scene. The scene people think of when they think of Macbeth.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Greg murmurs, shooting Sherlock a look that seems to say, ‘Behave.’ Sherlock rolls his eyes and stands, moving closer to the center of the room, closer to John who steadily returns his gaze. And then he quirks an eyebrow and drops his sides on the floor, and Sherlock finds himself smiling, despite his best intentions.

“How now? What news?”

“He has almost supped. Why have you left the chamber?”

The scene is a veritable tennis match, with Sherlock lobbing up lines and John returning them with the heat of a fierce forehand. The room fades away as they practically circle each other, fully embodying Macbeth and Lady M despite the fact that they’re in the middle of a studio in godforsaken Times Square.

“I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show.
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.”

The final line is his, though it takes him a moment to realize he’s said it. Slowly, the room comes back: the harsh fluorescent lights and the distant honking of the cabs on the street below; the rapid patter of his heart against his sternum and the effort to pull air into his lungs. But most importantly, the man in front of him breathing deeply and letting the character fall away from him like a sheer curtain, revealing the actor beneath with his crisp jumper and self-effacing smile.

The room is deadly silent, the tick of the clock above the door the only thing that dare break the quiet.

Finally, unable to stand it anymore, John sticks out his hand with a wry smirk. “We haven’t actually met, yet. I’m John.”

And the spell that had fallen over the room breaks as chuckles abound, and Sherlock blinks down at the proffered hand, feeling like he’s moving through treacle as he takes it.

“Sherlock. Sherlock Holmes.” His voice is raspy, but he finds he doesn’t care as John smiles.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Holmes.” Then he bends to pick up his fallen sides and turns to the table, where every occupant looks like they want to propose to him. Even Greg. Especially Greg.

“Anything else?”

“No, I think that’ll do it,” Greg manages as he stands and comes around the table, grabbing hold of John’s hand. “Thanks so much for coming in. Particularly on your day off.”

John shrugs. “What, a chance to read Shakespeare with Sherlock Holmes? Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He winks in Sherlock’s direction and the man most definitely does not flush. John then accepts a kiss on the cheek from a positively besotted Mrs. Hudson and shoots a wave to Molly before heading for the door and stopping by the jamb. “Thanks for the opportunity to read. I truly do appreciate it.”
And then he’s gone.

The room seems to wait a moment until the telltale ding of the elevator in the hall signals its arrival, and then Greg turns to Sherlock, a smug smile playing on his lips.

“Are you convinced?”

Sherlock doesn’t take his eyes off the door as his head attempts to figure out what exactly his body is feeling. He hates this – this uncertainty. He had been so convinced that John Watson would positively fail and yet he’d managed to pass every expectation Sherlock had set for him and then some.

He turns to Greg, ignoring the way Molly and Mrs. Hudson are waiting for his reply with clasped hands and bated breath, like teenagers at a pop concert. Typical.

No one, and he means no one, has thrown him on his head the way John Watson has and that is unacceptable.

Unacceptable and yet intriguing.

Damn.

xxxxxx

John exits the subway back in his West Village neighborhood and glances at his phone, wondering how, in the fifteen minutes he was underground, he managed to garner five missed calls, three voicemails, and ten text messages.

And before he can even listen to or read any of them, his phone lights up in his hand again, Mike Stamford blinking across the screen.

“Hello?”

“You cheeky bastard,” Mike replies and John can hear his grin through the phone.

“What are you on about?”

“Lace up your corset, Lady M, rehearsals begin February 2nd.”

Chapter End Notes

- The restaurant that Greg and John go to is called Glass House Tavern on 47th between 8th and Broadway and, yes, their risotto balls really are to die for.
- The studios John reads in are called The New 42nd St. Studios.
- ABT is the American Ballet Theatre.
What We Are, What We May Be

Chapter Summary

“What’s really going on here? I know you get wound up before a first rehearsal, but this is… this is taking it to a new level.”

And it is. He’s pacing the length of his rug from mantle to bookcase, growling at inanimate objects along the way. “I worry that – I…”

“Yes?”

“He might just be as good as you all think he is.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We know what we are, but know not what we may be.

- Hamlet, Act IV, Scene 5

The January wind nips at his cheeks as he pushes the door to the rooftop open, yet the alarming amount of champagne coursing through his veins makes everything a little bit numb at the moment. A little bit wobbly, too. John stumbles down a step and swears on his life that the noise that just left his mouth was not a giggle.

“Christ, it’s witch tit cold,” Aaron mutters as he loops the scarf around his neck and tucks the box of matches under his arm.

“We’re gonna get arrested,” John says for what must be the twentieth time that evening and Aaron waves him off, placing the makeshift bonfire on the ground.

“It’ll be fine.”

“You say that now and next thing you know, we’ll be trading sexual favors for cigarettes.”

“John Watson, you sound like you have first hand knowledge of such things.”

“Git,” John mutters as he shoves his fellow actor out of the way and grabs the matches.

“Full of secrets, you are,” Aaron continues through laughter, light dancing across his face when the little pile of wood catches fire. “Hey! There we go!”

The few drunk ensemble members that have followed their idiot leading men up to the roof cheer and, despite the fact that it’s two months past November 5th, he feels closer to home than he has in quite some time as the little cloth dummy’s features melt and disappear.

“Aaron, this might be the most ridiculous thing anyone’s ever done for me, but ta, I’m chuffed.” It takes them two tries to clink their flutes and before he knows it, Aaron is moving to the center of their makeshift circle and banging his ring against the glass.
“Speech! Speech!” their fellow actors call and John hopes it’s a short one because, frankly, he’s bloody freezing.

“I’d like to propose a toast,” Aaron begins, slurring only slightly and coughing as the wind shifts, blowing the smoke from the fire into his face, “to our fearless leader. A gentleman not of these parts but very much of our hearts – ” he pauses as various people ‘aw’ and ‘boo’ in equal measure. “To John Watson, who’s leaving us musical theatre bastards behind to go over to the dark side… Shakespeare.” Aaron visibly shudders and John laughs, raising his champagne glass with a cheeky smile, which softens when Aaron seems to sober. “All joking aside, you’ve led this company in a way I’ve never encountered before. I can’t speak for everyone, but I have a feeling I do, when I say that we respect you, we will miss you, and we love you.”

Whoops and catcalls and “hear hears!” go up around them and John, to his mortification, finds himself getting choked up.

“I can say, without a doubt, that the feeling is very much mutual,” he manages, raising his glass to those around him and downing the last of his champagne.

He’s saved from any more displays of sentimentality when a voice carries across 45th Street from an adjacent roof, thick New York accent displaying the fact that he’s more than a bit hacked off. “Hey, you there! Is that a fire? You can’t do that!”

“Shit!” Aaron yelps, ducking behind the roof’s low wall as the rest of the ensemble hits the deck in similar fashion. “Now what?”

John coughs up champagne through his laughter. “Um, run.”

xxxxxx

Irene pauses at the front door and adjusts the rather large bottle of gin in her arm, before ringing the bell and waiting for the telltale sound of stomping to inform her that Sherlock knows she’s there.

Sure enough, the door opens a moment later to reveal the disheveled man himself, who barely spares her a glance before he retreats back into the apartment and flops rather unceremoniously onto the leather couch.

“Good morning to you, too.”

“I see you come bearing gifts,” he mutters into the pillow and she holds up the gin bottle.

“Never too early for a good martini.”

“The nation’s doctors would say otherwise.”

“Which is why I’m proud to be British.” She sits back in the chair across from the sofa and crosses her legs one over the other. She’s underdressed today – skin-tight jeans and a silk blouse – if only because she knows that today is the day before first rehearsal. Therefore, today will be a day of handholding and heavy drinking.

After a moment of silence, she heads over to the bar and makes herself a gin and tonic. Limes count as a breakfast food, right?

“You know this is all in your head, don’t you?” she says as she turns and leans against the counter. “This insecurity?”
“Isn’t that the very point of insecurity? That it’s all in one’s head?”

“Not if you actually have a reason to be insecure. And frankly, my dear, you don’t.”

His scoff is muffled by the pillow his face is buried in, but she knows she’s somewhere near the mark by the way his shoulders release the slightest bit of tension.

“You know the first time I saw you onstage?”

“Yes, Romeo and Juliet, Stratford, 2004.”

“No,” she replies with a sly smile and he sits up, staring at her like she’s just rocked him to the core.

“What? Of course it is. You’ve told that story 100 times. You knew you wanted to become an agent when you saw me do the balcony scene because… Well. Frankly, I can’t recall why because the story stopped being about me, but still. You wouldn’t lie to your only client.” He whips the sash of his dressing gown to the side as if to drive his point home and now it’s her turn to scoff.

“I lie to you all the time. And no, the first time actually wasn’t Stratford. It was a blackbox theatre in Soho in 2003. I suppose you had gone rogue from RADA and you were doing a minimalistic, gritty Sarah Kane piece – ”

“You saw Cleansed?” He looks genuinely impressed, before his face hardens into his usual air of indifference. “And using ‘gritty’ and ‘Sarah Kane’ in the same sentence is redundant.”

“Forgive me,” she drawls, taking a sip of her drink. “But do you want to know the funny part? I was supposed to see a new little rock musical appearing in the same building that night and I stumbled into the wrong theatre. And starring in that little rock musical was a fellow nobody named John Watson.” She smiles as his face slackens once more. “You were performing one wall away from each other and had no idea. Funny, that.”

He stares at her for only a moment, but it reveals everything. And Sherlock knows it.

“Greg told me about his reading.”

“So?” Sherlock snaps before stomping over to her and snatching the drink from her hand.

“You hate tonic,” she reminds him as he takes a gulp and grimaces.

“I don’t hate tonic. If you hate tonic, they revoke your citizenship.”

“He said he was fantastic.”

“Must we talk about this?” Sherlock says to the ceiling. “You’ll be at the read through tomorrow, you’ll hear it then.”

“Sherlock.” She gently takes the drink back and counts it as a minor victory when he allows her to.

“What’s really going on here? I know you get wound up before a first rehearsal, but this is… this is taking it to a new level.”

And it is. He’s pacing the length of his rug from mantle to bookcase, growling at inanimate objects along the way. “I worry that – I…”

“Yes?”

“He might just be as good as you all think he is.”
Irene laughs. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“I don’t know.” He pauses and, for the briefest of moments, stands looking utterly lost in the middle of the living room, staring at some spectre in the distance, and Irene understands why.

Sherlock hates not knowing.

xxxxxx

Molly is counting the mini-muffins and bagels for the third time that morning, ensuring that the company management and production teams have ordered enough to feed a cast of around 30, plus crew.

“There’s a lot of testosterone in this room,” Molly murmurs as she looks around and Sally, their stage manager, grins devilishly beside her.

“I know. It’s wonderful.”

Greg’s holding a paper cup full of coffee, idly chatting to a few of the designers across the room. John’s getting to know his fellow actors as only a genial, outgoing man can, and Sherlock… well, Sherlock is nowhere to be seen.

She glances at her watch for the fifth time in two minutes and Sally gently lowers her wrist. “Relax. He’s got time. I won’t start worrying until Greg’s mid-speech and our leading man still hasn’t made an appearance.”

“He’s not usually late. He’s very professional; very by the book. He prides himself on it.” Molly worries her lip with her teeth and resolutely does not glance at the clock again. “Maybe I should call Irene.”

“Molly,” Sally grabs her shoulders and steers her towards the craft service table. “Go get something to eat. But maybe no sugar or caffeine, yeah?”

Molly nods robotically and heads for a plate of bananas, stopping just short and debating on whether or not to go for a donut instead.

“Nice spread,” a voice says next to her and she jumps as she turns to face John Watson. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.” His smile is warm and she finds the tension leaving her shoulders bit by bit.

“No, no. It’s fine. Just – you know, first day jitters.”

He laughs and tugs off two bananas from the bunch, holding one out for her. “I hear ya. I plan on saving this for later. I haven’t been able to stomach food this morning.”

“Same.” They fall into a companionable silence and look out over the room.

“Good group of people,” John says after a moment and Molly nods.

“Greg gets the best.”

“You yourself included, I’m sure,” is his reply and she feels herself flush. She’s never counted herself among the elite crop of theatre professionals that flock to Greg’s side, but… perhaps she should. She’s not totally useless. As John Watson seems determined to point out. “I read the research packet you put together. Amazing stuff. I thought I had a decent grasp on the text, but clearly not.”
“Oh, thanks. It’s fun to do the dramaturgy,” she says, shrugging. “You feel a bit like a detective.”

“I’m sure.”

She’s not one to fangirl over the actors that come across her path, but after a moment’s contemplation, she finds the words tumbling from her mouth. “You were wonderful in *Kiss Me, Kate* last summer. It was one of the best things I’ve seen in a while.”

“Oh, cheers.” He ducks his head in an utterly adorable way and digs the toe of his shoe into the hardwood floor. “Until today, that was the closest I thought I’d ever get to Shakespeare.”

She laughs and nudges him with her shoulder. “Well, buckle your seatbelt.”

“No kidding.”

And before she knows it, ten minutes of pleasant conversation has passed and she hasn’t glanced at the clock once. In fact, it isn’t until John’s voice trails off that she even remembers she probably has other duties to attend to, but she follows his gaze towards the door, vaguely registering the slight hush that’s fallen over the room.

Oh.

Sherlock Holmes has just arrived.

xxxxxx

His cool eyes scan the room, cataloguing Greg glancing at the clock and giving him a significant look, before coming to focus on the man standing by the food chatting with Molly.

Well, no longer chatting with Molly because John Watson’s gaze is currently boring a hole through Sherlock’s leather jacket.

“I’m not late, am I?” he murmurs to Irene who pushes him further into the room.

“No, you’re a minute early, which makes you 24 minutes late in Sherlock-time.”

“Oh.” He maneuvers his way through the crowd, offering tight smiles to the unfamiliar faces and begrudgingly shaking hands with the returning designers. Well, at least with Sarah Sawyer and Ryan Dimmock. Anderson he leaves to his own devices.

“Sherlock, darling,” Mrs. Hudson croons, placing a wet smacker on his cheek as Greg claps him on the back.

“Cuttin’ it a bit close there, mate.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” he mutters with a stiff smile on his face as he waves to the gathered producers.

“All right, get settled then and we’ll round up the troops.”

“Mm.” He drifts towards the tables that have been set up in a giant square and takes his place at the chair with the binder *Sherlock Holmes* written across its front. It’s no surprise that the binder immediately to his left reads *John Watson*. No surprise and yet his stomach does a little flip, particularly when, a moment later, a coffee cup is placed next to said binder and a throat is cleared.

“Nice to see you again,” John says when Sherlock manages to meet his eyes.
“Yes,” he clips. “Likewise.”

Something cool passes across John’s face then. His smile is still kind and his demeanor jovial, but something in his eyes has hardened and the knot in the pit of Sherlock’s stomach tightens.

That’s not what he meant. That’s not –

“I hope the conclusion of *A Little Night Music* was satisfactory,” he tries.

John blinks in surprise and, after a moment, nods. “Very satisfactory. I’ll miss it.”

And Sherlock doesn’t know what to do with that, with enjoying a project so much that he regrets leaving, so he gives a curt little nod and accepts the tea that Irene is handing him as Sally calls the group into a circle.

Everyone introduces themselves, with the actors stating which parts they're playing. John stresses the *Lady* of Lady Macbeth causing giggles to erupt, and Sherlock watches in awe as John, without even meaning to, wraps every person in the room around his finger. Fascinating.

"Sherlock?" he vaguely hears Greg say and he blinks owlishly. "We know everyone here knows your bloody name, but would it kill you to introduce yourself?"

"Oh, uh, Sherlock Holmes. Macbeth." He gives a little nod as if cap the pronouncement and finds himself flushing when John smirks in his direction.

"Right," Greg begins as he claps his hands. "Designers, if you want to take us through the ideas?"

"When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

"When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won."

John Watson did two years at Central, contemporary and classical, starred in his school’s productions of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *Death of a Salesman* and somehow, somehow, landed a bit role in *My Fair Lady* in the West End and never looked back. He doesn’t doubt John’s musical theatre talent, not at all. He knows what he saw onstage in November. And he’d be lying if he said he’d stopped thinking about it in the three months that had passed since. But John is good. Better, perhaps, than the roles he’s been allotted and Sherlock wonders if even this, the holy grail of Lady M, will do the man justice. And he finds that he's so wrapped up in the enigma sat beside him that he nearly misses his cue:

“*Thrice to thine and thrice to mine*”
And thrice again, to make up nine.  
Peace! the charm's wound up."

Sherlock clears his throat and gets that familiar feeling of stepping off a precipice and not knowing if the drop is four meters or four hundred.

“So foul and fair a day I have not seen. ”

John groans as he drops his bag inside the door and flicks the light on, tossing his keys on the side table and jumping slightly at finding his sister already lounging in his favorite chair.

“Harry, I gave you that key for emergencies.”

“And this is an emergency. Your plants are dying.” She points to a droopy ficus tree in the corner as if to drive the point home.

“They’re fake.”

Her mouth drops into a surprised ‘o’ before she shrugs at being caught out. “Fine, I came here to get the first rehearsal scoop so I can sell you out to the highest Broadway blogging bidder.”

“You’re the very model of a modern Machiavellian sibling.”

“Don’t get all Gilbert and Sullivan on me now.”

John laughs. “I’m just impressed you know who Gilbert and Sullivan are.”

Harry sighs and stands, crossing over to her brother and manhandling him into his vacant chair.

“You’re supposed to tell me how your day was as I pour you a glass of the scotch that I know you keep hidden in the cabinet above the stove. That’s what siblings do.”

“No, that’s what 50s housewives do.”

“Shut up,” she laughs as she pours him a glass, well used to being around alcohol without feeling its familiar and intoxicating pull. “My breaking and entering does have a point.”

"Enlighten me," he drawls and she hands him his tumbler while simultaneously knocking him upside the head.

"Johnny…” she begins, coming around and sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of him, "I moved here with you because I had nothing left in England. I just – I know this is a big shift and I want to be there for you. What else are sisters good for, besides a good verbal horsewhipping now and then?" She pats his cheek as he chuckles, and he turns his head to place a kiss on her palm.

"True enough."

"So spill your secrets or else I might as well go back across the ocean. And you know how I hate packing.”

John smiles and takes a sip, if only to delay the answer that must inevitably come.

“He doesn’t like me.”

“Who?”
“Sherlock Holmes.”

“So?” She shrugs. “I’ve heard he doesn’t like anyone.”

John leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, bowing his head and groaning. “It’s hard when you’re supposed to act psychotically in love with him.”

“I don’t know… I could point you to a few exes of mine for inspiration if need be.”

He shoots her a look and she winks in reply.

“If he doesn’t like you, then he’s an idiot.”

“An idiot who’s been hailed as the greatest Shakespearean actor of his generation? Right.”

“John.” She reaches forward and tilts his chin up until his eyes meet hers. “The New York Times ran an article on you with the headline ‘The Most Likable Man on Broadway,’ you’ve never had a co-star say a bad word about you, and hell, even Buzzfeed named you one of the top ten hottest guys onstage today.”

“A real achievement,” he drawls and she lightly taps his cheek to shut him up.

“You’re obviously doing something right, is my point. So Sherlock Holmes can stuff it.”

John cracks a smile and shakes his head at the wonder that is his sister. Four years younger and yet she’s seen more than her fair share of hard luck. She’s got a sense of humor that is positively wicked and a heart the size of the Pacific. And John loves her for it.

“Now,” she begins as she stands and pulls a bunch of take-out menus from the drawer, fanning them out in front of her and allowing John to pick, “are you going to tell me about your first day or do I have to go down there and befriend your stage manager?”

John barks out a laugh. “You’d like her. The PSM is a bit of a hardass, but her ASM is sweet. And hot to boot.”

She swats him in the head with a menu from Tue Thai. “Well it’ll do me no good if you get to her first!”

“I don’t think she plays for my team.” He holds up his hands in self-defense and she narrows her eyes.

“Bully for me, then. What’s her name?”

John smiles, already sliding her number across the coffee table. “Clara.”

xxxxxx

Five days.

It’s been five days and Sherlock is thisclose to setting fire to the rehearsal studio.

“No, no, no!”

The script hits the floor with a resounding clang and the actors in the immediate vicinity jump.

“Sherlock –” Greg begins, but Sherlock won’t have it. Not now.
“No, Greg, it’s wrong. It’s all wrong. The cadence, the pacing. Christ!”

He stalks the length of the room like a caged tiger and runs his hands through his unruly hair, daren’t meeting anyone’s eye less they figure out that they’ve not caused this particular outburst -

He has.

Because Sherlock can’t seem to find the structure, the chemistry, the magic that he and John had during John’s audition and it’s killing him. And it’s his own damn fault. He knows he’s only giving about 80% because going that extra 20 is turning into something too terrifying to face.

“Let’s take a five, shall we?” Sally offers and the rest of the company quickly scatter, leaving only Sherlock panting harshly in the center of the room, firmly ignoring the way John lingers on the edge of his peripheral vision. A man who’s both hurricane and harbor light.

Greg tries to catch his attention, but Sherlock bolts from the room and sequesters himself in an adjoining studio before anyone can offer whatever mindless platitudes they’ve grown accustomed to spouting in his presence.

He hopes against hope that the rest of the week won’t continue in such a fashion for he’s not sure his constitution could stomach it.

He has a feeling, though, that he’s going to be sorely disappointed.

xxxxxx

First weeks are meant to be full of speed bumps and road blocks and any other driving euphemism you may prefer to employ, but, as Greg watches Sherlock hastily pack up his things while blatantly ignoring the man next to him, Greg decides he’s had enough.

“Sherlock. Stay a moment, won’t you?”

The actor gives a brisk nod, his hair flopping over his eyes as he keeps his head low like a scolded child. Almost – almost as if he knows what’s coming.

Greg watches John give a surreptitious glance in Sherlock’s direction before shouldering his bag with sharp, jerky movements and all but stalking out the door. Greg doesn’t hold it against him; the rehearsal had been tough with Sherlock snapping at every stumbled line and every break for questions. The men of the ensemble were all but cowering in the corner, Sean, their MacDuff, had settled for brooding over his coffee mug, but John – John managed to hold onto his good humor throughout Sherlock’s tirades, despite the fact that most of the hissy fits seemed to be aimed in his direction. John’s smile never faltered, but Greg could tell, even after just a few days in his presence, that his calm cover was cracking.

The door slams behind John as he leaves and Greg feels a fraction of satisfaction as Sherlock flinches.

“Problem?” the actor finally says when the room has cleared, save for stage management, and Greg places his hands on his hips if only to keep himself from throttling the man across from him.

“We’ve been in rehearsals for nearly a week and I think I can count on one hand the number of times you’ve spoken to John Watson using words that were not written by the Bard.”

Sherlock raises his eyebrows. “Problem?”
“He’s your goddamn leading man, Sherlock,” Greg snaps. “I know it’s not John. It’s you. It’s always you. And I don’t know what’s going on, but it needs to stop. Now. Or I swear to god, I will find another Macbeth –”

Sherlock scoffs and that’s Greg’s breaking point as he steps forward and points a finger in the other man’s face.

“Do not test me, Sherlock Holmes. I’m the only friend you have at the moment. Hell, I’m the only friend you’ve ever had it seems!” He pinches the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply and stepping back. “And I think it’s high time you made some more.”

After a moment, Greg looks up to find Sherlock staring at him wide-eyed, as if finally considering this to be one threat his director might actually follow through on.

xxxxxx

John listens to the couple of voicemails he’s gotten while in rehearsals – one from Mike, two from Harry – and nervously taps his foot against the linoleum. He’s never had to confront a costar in this manner and, truth be told, he’s really not looking forward to it.

But after endless rants, a dozen outbursts, and more than a few muttered profanities, John Watson has had enough. There’s a level of professionalism one is to expect on a Broadway production and it’s there in the play and in the team, but in his leading man, it’s sorely lacking.

Sure enough, Macbeth himself trudges out of the rehearsal room a moment later and John allows himself a second of fortification before stepping into the middle of the hallway and pulling himself up to his full height.

“What is your problem?” he spits, low enough to be mindful of those still in the rehearsal room as the words pierce the tense air between them. “Am I truly that bad? Am I that undeserving? I know I might not seem up to snuff, but let me tell you, I can hold my own on a stage with the great Sherlock Holmes! And frankly, I think it’s high time you get your head out of your arse and actually look at the men acting opposite you. I think you might be surprised by what you find.”

Sherlock seems to have shrunk during John’s tirade, his shoulders hunched as if bracing for a blow, blue eyes staring at a button on John’s shirt. “Quite,” he replies after a moment. “Dinner?”

And John is momentarily at a loss, convinced he must have misheard. “What?”

Sherlock clears his throat, finally glancing up. It’s magnetic. “Would you like to have dinner with me?”

John frowns. This is not how he thought this conversation was going to go. “Are you serious? Now?”

“It is an acceptable time to eat, is it not?” Sherlock raises his eyebrows and John can’t really dispute the fact. He is hungry after all.

“Um, all right,” he finds himself saying as Sherlock gives him a small nod and turns, punching the button for the elevator. John follows at a pace behind, hand reaching up to unconsciously run through his hair, lips still parted in astonishment.

Well, that was unexpected.
- RADA is the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Their alumni list is kind of ridiculous.
- Sarah Kane is a playwright who suffered from severe depression and sadly ended up taking her own life in 1999. Her pieces, however, have become benchmarks of modern British playwriting.
- Central is the Central School of Speech and Drama. It, too, has many notable alums.
- Gilbert and Sullivan wrote H.M.S. Pinafore and The Pirates of Penzance. One of their more famous songs is "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General."
“Sherlock Holmes, are you trying to apologize?”

“No, I – ” But Sherlock’s mouth snaps shut and he glances down at the menu once more. “Possibly.”

“You’re a tosser, you know that, right?” he says as he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms.

“It’s been said before.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

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*I pray you, do not fall in love with me,*  
*For I am falser than vows made in wine.*  
*-As You Like It, Act III, Scene 5-

John keeps darting sidelong glances at the tall enigma beside him all the way down to the ground floor, where the ding of the elevator’s arrival brings him back to himself.

What exactly did he just agree to?

His phone buzzes in his hand and he starts, having forgotten he was holding the thing to begin with. A quick glance shows a text from Mike:

*Broadway.com wants another blog*  
*focused on M. Up for it?*

He has half a heart to text back a resounding NO, that would make his feelings on the topic perfectly clear via technology, but he holds off, too confused with the situation at hand to deal with Mike and his blogs.

“Um, are we going anywhere in particular?” John asks, hurrying a bit to keep up with Sherlock’s long strides.

“I know a great Italian place a few blocks away. Manager owes me a favor,” Sherlock replies as he bobs and weaves his way through the crowds on 8th Avenue.

“Ah, I see.” He doesn’t.

They eventually make a right onto 47th Street and, for a moment, John thinks they’re headed into the restaurant he went with Greg, but they duck into a door just beyond it, leading down into a white brick room covered in black and white photos from *Roman Holiday*, which just so happens to be one of John’s favorite films.
“Ah! Mr. Holmes!” a man with a thick Italian accent greets them, placing a kiss to each of Sherlock cheeks, much to John’s delight and Sherlock’s chagrin.

“Giorgio, this is my, uh, castmate, John Watson.”

And John notices the falter as much as Georgio does it seems, as the gentleman fixes him with a knowing look.

Oh Christ.

“I know who Mr. Watson is, of course!” Giorgio beams as he gives John’s hand a hearty shake. “I’ve seen you in many things, but I think Anything Goes was my favorite.”

“Thank you,” John manages before Sherlock is practically manhandling him out of his jacket and handing it to the coat check girl.

“I’ll take you to your usual table.” Giorgio grabs two menus and bustles off towards the back of the restaurant and Sherlock makes a motion that John should follow, which he does with more than a little confusion. He’s not sure what exactly has transpired over the past twenty minutes, when he was leaving rehearsal more than a bit hacked off, but now he’s in a restaurant and, oh god, yep – the maitre’d is lighting a candle.

Wonderful.

John clears his throat as he takes his seat in the corner and accepts the menu from Giorgio with a forced smile. “Ta.”

“Is red all right with you, John?”

“Sorry?” he asks, his brain a little sluggish as he meets Sherlock’s expectant gaze.

“Wine. Is red all right?”

“Oh, yes. Sure.”

Sherlock hands the wine list back to Giorgio. “The usual.”

“Grazie.”

The maitre’d disappears with a flourish and John is left awkwardly blinking into the specials list as a heavy silence falls over the table.

“Your presence in the rehearsal room has been… appreciated,” Sherlock says after a moment and John barks out a vicious laugh.

“Could have fooled me.” He glances up and finds Sherlock looking… not quite lost, but something close to it.

“John, I’m very good at what I do. Not acting – ” he backpedals at John’s raised eyebrow, “I mean – I am good at acting. Fairly, anyway, but that’s not – that’s not what I’m trying to say.” He frowns and stares at his water glass, forehead creasing in a way that John really shouldn’t find adorable. “I see things that other people don’t. I make conclusions. Deductions. That’s what I’m good at. But with you…” he glances up and John inhales sharply. “With you, I seem to have made a grave misjudgment.” Sherlock’s hands go to his napkin and begin to fiddle with it, tying knots that John doesn’t think will ever come undone.
Finally, after a drawn out moment, he takes pity on him. “Sherlock Holmes, are you trying to apologize?”

“No, I – ” But Sherlock’s mouth snaps shut and he glances down at the menu once more. “Possibly.”

“You’re a tosser, you know that, right?” he says as he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms.

“It’s been said before.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he laughs. “Brilliant actor, but a git of massive proportions.”

“Yes, thank you.” Sherlock shifts in his seat and John eyes him for a moment longer, knowing he won’t dare let the man off the hook that easily. But the conversation can continue in a moment.

“So, what’s good here?”

“Everything,” the other man quickly replies, “but particularly the gnocchi.”

John decides to trust Sherlock’s judgment, at least when it comes to food, and orders the gnocchi when Giorgio comes back, with Sherlock getting the seafood risotto special. A very expensive-looking bottle of wine is poured and John doesn’t miss the way Giorgio inspects the status of the candle either before he goes. He clears his throat and places his elbows on the table, fixing the man across from him with his most withering gaze.

“So you deduce people.”

“Sort of.”

“Have a go at me, then.”

Sherlock’s head snaps up. “Pardon?”

“Go on,” he urges, grabbing a dinner roll from the breadbasket, as Sherlock cocks his head at him, an expression of Are you sure? playing on his face. John smiles and nods at the unasked question.

The brunette inhales a bracing breath before blurting out, “Afghanistan or Iraq?”

And all of the blood leaves John’s face.

“What?” he whispers.

“Your haircut and the way you hold yourself suggest military. You stand like a soldier onstage even when not playing one, a subconscious bleed through even the best of actors can’t shake off. When Banquo rolled his ankle in rehearsal, you quickly leapt to his assistance, exhibiting medical expertise well beyond long nights spent on WebMD, so army doctor. You have a barely perceptible limp, which your therapist thinks is psychosomatic. Quite correctly, I’m afraid. Your limp is worse when you walk, but you don’t ask for a chair when you stand, and it disappears altogether when you’re onstage, so it’s at least partly psychosomatic. That says the origins of the injury were traumatic. Wounded in action, then. Your theatre career took off over a decade ago, so it must have been at least twelve years since your discharge. Which area of the world was our army focusing its firepower on twelve years ago? Afghanistan or Iraq.”

John simply gapes, because truly, what else is there to do in this moment? “You said I had a therapist.”

“You’ve got a psychosomatic limp and you do theatre for a living. Of course you’ve got a therapist.
And then there’s your brother,” he says, nodding at John’s overturned phone on the table. “He worries about you, but you won’t ask him for help probably because he’s an alcoholic. The engraving: Harry Watson. Clearly a family member, but not your father. This is a young man’s gadget. Could be a cousin, but you’re an expatriate quite capable of purchasing your own smartphone, unless you were doing a favor for someone close to you by taking it off their hands. So, brother it is.”

John shakes his head. “How can you possibly know about the drinking?”

“Shot in the dark. Good one, though. Power connection,” he says, lifting the phone and showing John. “Tiny little scuffmarks around the edge of it. Every night, he’d go to plug it in to charge, but his hands are shaking. You never see those marks on a sober man’s phone. Never see a drunk’s without them. But, all that aside, if there’s one thing I know to be true above all things, you are positively *wasted* in musical theatre.”

The silence between them is only broken by the occasional clink of a utensil against a dinner plate, the sound being kept at bay by whatever the hell *that* was.

“That was amazing,” John finally breathes and Sherlock straightens in his chair.

“Do you think so?”

“Of course it was. It was extraordinary. Quite… extraordinary.” He tries very hard to remove the stars from his eyes. He’s not quite sure he succeeds.

“That’s not what people usually say,” Sherlock murmurs and John raises an eyebrow.

“And what do they normally say?”

“Fuck off.”

John laughs and Sherlock cracks his version of a tight-lipped smile, before blinking down at his plate, and therefore missing John’s smirk.

“Except Harry is short for Harriet. And she’s been sober for fifteen months, two weeks, and five days.”

Sherlock’s head snaps up and he leans back looking both frustrated with himself and perhaps… a little bit contrite? No, that can’t be right. Sherlock Holmes doesn’t do contrite.

“Ah. Well, can’t win them all.” He shrugs and it’s pitiful enough to be endearing.

John takes advantage of the rare moment of vulnerability, when the walls of the great Sherlock Holmes seem to have weakened, and studies him. He looks remarkably young in the dancing light of the candle: eyelashes brushing across skin that’s flushed with the sudden praise for something most people deem offensive. A severe miscalculation on the majority’s part if there ever was one.

“Sherlock, what is this?” he asks softly. “What are we doing here?”

Sherlock shrugs again and goes back to knotting his napkin. “Greg told me I had to make friends.”

John glances around incredulously. “And this is how you go about doing it? By shanghaiing me into dinner and forcing conversation?”

“I didn’t find the conversation forced,” Sherlock replies because, yes, of course that’s what he would
focus on. “In fact, I found it rather witty.”

John snorts his wine and coughs, spluttering as he attempts to breathe.

“I hope you’re not in need of medical assistance as my knowledge of that particular aspect of science is, I’m sure, sorely lacking compared to your own.”

John gives him a thumbs up, eventually swallowing and getting his breath under control, before lifting his watery gaze to meet Sherlock’s steady one.

“No one knows about Afghanistan,” he murmurs.

“So I gathered,” Sherlock replies, equally reverently.

“Except Harry, of course.” John steadies his voice, making sure his next message is read loud and clear. “I’ve worked very hard to ensure it doesn’t become a footnote in every story about me.”

“You’re decorated. You should be proud.”

“I’ve watched men die,” John snaps, before his features soften. Sadden. “And I could do nothing to help them. There’s no pride in that.”

“There’s honor.” And the way those two words are said takes John’s breath away, allowing him to wonder for the first time in thirteen years whether ‘honorable’ would be a way his fallen comrades would describe him. “John, I hope you know you can count on me to keep Afghanistan to myself.” Sherlock looks worried, as if all of the progress they’ve made over the last thirty minutes is about to be dashed across 47th Street.

And John doesn’t know why – this is the most he’s spoken to Sherlock Holmes since they began playing spouses five days ago – but something in his expression, or maybe it’s something just in him, makes John more than confident when he replies,

“I know.”

xxxxxx

The food arrives not a moment too soon, as Sherlock is finding the wine to be more than a bit potent. That’s what he gets for subsisting on nothing but a single smoothie per day for the past three days.

There are questions he wants to ask, though, and a little liquid courage might go a long way to getting them out of his mouth. He takes a bite of risotto and another sip of wine, watching John eat in companionable silence.

“Good recommendation,” the blonde remarks after a moment, pointing his fork at his plate. “Very good.”

“I’d never lie to you,” is Sherlock’s reply, just something that people say, but what’s surprising (alarming, even) is that he finds himself meaning it. He knows, without a doubt, he would never lie to the man across from him, which is a heady and earth-tilting realization to come to at 7:36pm on a Saturday evening.

Their plates gradually become emptier and emptier and Sherlock doesn’t protest when another bottle of wine magically appears on their table. His head feels light and his thoughts airy – a nice and relieving contrast from the constant drone of panic panic panic that’s been banging away at the doors of his mind palace ever since John Watson got the part.
“You did get shot, though,” he states, as if it hasn’t been twenty minutes since they last broached this topic of conversation.

“Sorry?”

“In Afghanistan, there was an actual wound.”

“Oh, yeah. The shoulder,” he replies, fingers dancing over his left clavicle where Sherlock knows he’s likely feeling the scar tissue through the cotton of his shirt.

“You were training to be a doctor.”

“Surgeon, actually.”

Hm. Interesting. “Why not continue?”

John smiles a smile that’s both self-deprecating and a little bit sad. “No one wants a scalpel to be held in shaky hands.”

“Your hands don’t shake.”

“And how would you know?” It comes out more suggestive than John probably intends and he immediately reddens. It’s endearing enough for Sherlock to shift the conversation into more appropriate waters, saving the man from himself.

“Why theatre?”

John shrugs. “I was good at it. And it kept the nightmares at bay. Most of the time, anyway.”

“You have PTSD.” It’s not a question, and John leans back, bringing his wine glass with him.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

Sherlock has to agree, but there’s something more. What makes an army medic turn to playacting? Ah. Yes. There it is. “You started doing theatre as a form of therapy.”

John looks impressed as lets out a chuckle. “Doctor’s orders.”

“And someone along the way told you you were good enough to pursue a career.” He steeples his fingers and waits for John’s reply.

“The therapy group had a performance and someone from Central happened to be in the audience. I was handed a brochure and started classes the following week.”

Sherlock smiles. “And you were onstage in the West End less than two years later.”

John blushes and Sherlock finds himself studying the man across from him. From his unassuming air to his crisp button-down shirt. From the silver that flecks his straw-blonde hair to the bit of sauce that’s stained the cuff of his sleeve. And Sherlock wants nothing more than to shake this man and make him realize just how good he is. How he could command a stage with merely a glance; how he does without even realizing it. There is so much raw potential in John Watson and, in this moment, with wine making him feel warm and flush and irrational, Sherlock Holmes wants nothing more than to unleash it.

“You played George in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf.*”
John quirks an eyebrow at the sudden topic change. “In school, yeah.”

“Still counts. It’s one of my favorite roles.”

“Well, I was about twenty years too young for it, but it was a good time. A beast of a role, but a good time.”

“Perhaps we’ll get to see you take it on in the near future.”

“Oi, I’ve still got a good ten years before I’m old enough for it,” John laughs, chucking his napkin across the table. “Don’t make me an old man yet.”

And Sherlock finds himself smiling, the muscles unused to being worked so much over the course of an evening.

John’s laughter dies down and he stares seriously at his glass, contemplative for a moment. “Well, Macbeth’s been a dream, too, and Lady M is close enough. I should thank you.”

“Don’t. As I’m sure you’re aware,” he starts, guilt settling heavy in his gut, “I was not exactly in your corner, so to speak.”

John fixes him with a look that says ‘Trust me, I know.’ Then his face softens, looking almost… wary. Unsure. “And now?”

“I think it’s safe to say you will find me very much in your corner,” Sherlock murmurs and warmth blooms in John's chest.

The sentiment is broken, thankfully, as Giorgio places a plate of tiramisu in the middle of the table flanked by two forks.

“Buon appetito.”

“Grazie,” Sherlock says, suddenly feeling… nervous? That’s new. He picks up a fork and glances at John under lowered lashes. “You don’t mind sharing?”

“Sherlock, we’re going to have to kiss onstage,” John laughs as he scoops a bite. “Sharing dessert is hardly something worth noting.”

Oh, Sherlock thinks as his stomach plummets. He really should have read the script more thoroughly.

xxxxxx

“Macbeth’s been a dream.”

Sherlock waves goodbye to John as they part ways outside of the restaurant, his words from earlier in the evening haunting his every thought.

“Macbeth’s been a dream.”

He stands on the sidewalk, watching as John bobs and weaves his way through the crowded sidewalk towards Times Square to catch the subway home. He’s stopped about halfway down the block by a woman who’s clearly passing on her adoration if her megawatt smile and exuberant hand gestures are anything to go by, and John smiles in reply, nodding his head in thanks. The woman continues on her way, but John stops and turns back, straightening in what is clearly surprise when he finds Sherlock still standing on the sidewalk in the same place he left him.
Sherlock offers another small, awkward wave, cursing himself for being caught and abruptly turns, pulling the collar of his coat high around his neck as he heads for 8th Ave and raises his arm for a cab.

“Macbeth’s been a dream.”

Something about that doesn’t sit right with him and he parses the words as he slides into the yellow taxi, muttering his address and immediately hitting mute on the television screen in front of him. He needs to think. He can’t have talk show hosts nattering on about inane things in his ear.

Not when John Watson is currently flooding his mind.

“Well, Macbeth’s been a dream, too, and Lady M is close enough.”

But ‘close enough’ isn’t good enough and, suddenly, Sherlock knows exactly what he has to do. Whipping out his phone, he fires off a group text to Greg and Irene asking (demanding, really) that they meet him at Mrs. Hudson’s immediately. With that done, he dials her number and waits impatiently for the woman to answer.

“Sherlock, dear, is everything all right? It’s nearly ten o’clock.”

He resists the urge to roll his eyes at the thought of ten o’clock being considered late. “Mrs. Hudson, emergency meeting. I’m on my way to your place.”

“Oh dear, what’s happened?”

“I’ll explain in person,” he clips as he hangs up and calls to the cab driver. “Change of address! Fifth and 64th. Please,” he adds as an afterthought.

The cabbie nods and makes an abrupt turn on 72nd Street, cutting across the park and emerging on the east side.

Sherlock glances at his phone and reads the two responses from Greg (Christ, now what?) and Irene (This better be interesting.) Sherlock smirks as he pockets the mobile and watches the trees go by. ‘Interesting’ will be one word for it.

A few minutes later, they’re pulling up outside Mrs. Hudson’s luxury coop overlooking the park and he hands the cabbie some money before nodding at the doorman and bounding into the lobby. Mrs. Hudson’s flat takes over the entire 14th floor and Sherlock wipes his shoes on the mat as he steps out of the elevator.

“Sherlock? Is that you?”

“Well I certainly hope it’s me or your building has a major security flaw.”

She pokes her head out of one of the many rooms and tsks him even as she takes his coat and kisses his cheek. “Now what’s all this about?”

“In a moment,” Sherlock replies, out of breath for some reason he dare not examine. “Greg and Irene are on their way.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson puts her hand to her mouth as if her entire Broadway show is already
falling to pieces, and Sherlock assures her with a firm squeeze of her shoulders.

“None of that. This is… well, I think good news. I have an idea.”

“Sherlock, the last idea you had cost me nearly $10,000 to refurbish my kitchen.”

He gives a somewhat sheepish shrug. “This isn’t that kind of idea.”

“Thank heavens,” she mutters, moving to the massive kitchen and puttering about fixing tea. For as much money as she has, she rarely keeps a household staff and Sherlock loves that about her.

She fusses over his skinny frame and prods him for any clue as to what this is about, but he remains steadfast in his desire not to reveal anything until all parties are present. And fifteen minutes later, the elevator dings and both Greg and Irene emerge: Greg looking disheveled and Irene looking like she was interrupted on what can only have been a rather interesting date.

“What, did you two share a cab?”

They glance at each other and roll their eyes simultaneously. “We happened to arrive at the same time,” Irene says, adjusting her push-up bra, much to Greg’s delight. She swats at him without even a look in his direction and Sherlock smirks.

“Now what’s all this about? I was in the middle of a Law and Order marathon,” Greg groans, accepting a kiss from Mrs. Hudson as she ushers them all into the sitting room. Well, one of the sitting rooms. Once they’re all seated looking at him expectantly, Sherlock claps his hands together and takes a deep breath.

“I had dinner with John Watson tonight.”

And three comical expressions of shock stare back him, making him almost wish he had a camera.

“You what?” Greg asks as Irene blurts out:

“Is he still alive?”

“I’m shocked you’re still alive, dear.” And leave it to Mrs. Hudson to one-up them all.

Sherlock dismisses them with a wave of his hand as he closes his eyes and tries to remember the words he prepared in the cab. The bottle of wine he consumed is making things a bit difficult at the moment, though.

“I think John and I should switch parts,” he states, and there it is. No muss, no fuss.

Now he wishes he had a camera.

If their jaws dropped any further, they’d have to unhinge their joints. Sherlock allows the silence to continue for a few moments more before rolling his eyes and huffing. “Stop looking like I just announced I’m joining the Royal Ballet. It makes the most sense.”

“You joining the Royal Ballet is actually not that far-fetched,” Irene points out.

“But,” Greg splutters, ignoring her and getting back to the topic at hand, “Macbeth is the larger role.”

“And Lady M will draw the most press,” Irene drawls.

“That’s not the reason,” Sherlock snaps. “It’s just – John should be the king. That’s just – that’s how
it should be.” They need to understand this. They don’t know John the way… No, he can’t go down that line of thinking. Not yet. They just – they need to know.

Suddenly Irene’s face pales. “You won’t be eligible for Leading Role when Tony time comes around.”

“I don’t care!” Sherlock barks. “He’s just… he’s good. Inherently good. He’ll be the more believable Macbeth and I’ll be the more believable Lady M. That’s just how it is.”

“Bloody hell,” Greg breathes and Sherlock knows he’s got him. It’s a valid argument, one that someone with a creative eye like Greg can’t dispute. “You’re sure? This isn’t something we can offer and then take back.”

“Greg, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. Give John Watson Macbeth. I guarantee you won’t regret it.”

Finally, he turns to Mrs. Hudson, who’s been silent throughout the whole exchange, and he’s shocked to find her watery gaze staring straight through him, down to the rapidly beating heart beneath.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she whispers and that’s all she says.

And Sherlock realizes that, after ten productions together, this is the moment she’s been waiting for. This unselfish moment.

And that, above all things, tells him that he’s making the right choice.

xxxxxx

John slaps blindly at his bedside table as the phone vibrates across the surface, threatening to fall to the floor before his hand makes contact and he snatches it up, squinting one eye open to read Mike Stamford filling up the screen.

“This can’t be good news,” he croaks as he answers, covering his eyes with his hand and flopping back against the pillows.

“I hope you haven’t started memorizing your lines.”

His stomach drops. “Christ, I’m getting sacked, aren’t I.” He knew things were rough with Sherlock, at least before this evening, but this was… he’s never been let go before.

“I’d say not,” Mike replies and John can hear the smile in his voice. “In fact, I’d say you’ve got a fair few more lines to learn. Get your beauty rest, Macbeth, you’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Wait…” John attempts to stand, gets tangled in his sheets and goes crashing to the floor, ensuring that, yes, he is in fact awake. “What?”

“You’ve been promoted to king. You know, ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ and all that shite.”

“Mike, be serious.”

“As a heart attack. Night now.”

John pulls the phone away from his ear and stares at it long after the line’s gone dead.
Greg holds his phone in his hand, just waiting for the inevitable ringtone to echo around his flat. Sure enough, the screen lights up a moment later, the Bob Dylan tune playing for a measure before he swipes to answer the call with a jovial, “John! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Greg.” His voice is crisp yet uncertain and Greg’s smile grows. “What are you playing at? Sherlock’s going to have an aneurism.”

“I highly doubt that,” Greg replies, “considering it was his idea.”

Chapter End Notes

- The restaurant John and Sherlock go to is called Scarlatto. It’s wicked good.
- "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" was written by Edward Albee.
With Hoops of Steel

Chapter Summary

“Do you actually know anyone else’s name? Besides Greg’s and mine?”

“Yes, that’s,” he points at Molly, “Maggie.”

“Wrong,” he replies and Sherlock huffs.

“John, I highly doubt knowing their names will change their opinion of me.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel.

- Hamlet, Act I, Scene 3

John hasn’t felt this dizzy since he was on a Tilt-o-Whirl with Harry at a country fair at age thirteen.

He vaguely recalls Greg’s amusement as he demanded to know where Sherlock lived, and he can only imagine what a sight he must look now, barreling out of his building at one in the morning, hair askew as he tugs on his jacket.

“You sure you want to open that door, mate?”

“I think that door’s already been flung wide, Greg,” was his clipped response before his director rattled off Sherlock’s Upper West Side address through laughter.

Which is how John finds himself in a cab hurtling its way along 10th Ave towards Sherlock’s flat as people stumble out of bars and onto the sidewalk in packs.

His phone buzzes in his hand and he glances down to find a text from his director. Thankfully, it lacks any ‘lol’s:

Please don’t damage my leading lady.

John rolls his eyes and quickly types back, Ha bloody ha.

But seriously, is the reply that comes through ten seconds later and John can’t help but smile.

I promise not to bruise those ridiculous cheekbones.

He means it as a joke, but when Greg doesn’t text back, John begins to worry. He’s just pulling up outside Sherlock’s building when the phone buzzes again in his hand.

House rules: no shagging before opening night.
Oh god. He pauses, body literally halfway out of the cab as he stares at the phone, cursing the sudden gallop of his heart.

“Is there a problem?” the cabbie asks and John starts, shaking his head and fully exiting.

“No, sorry,” he replies as he types out, **No worries there.**

He makes his way into the building, and punches the button for the lift, heart never quite slowing to a respectable pace as he bounces on his toes.

**That’s what they all say,** comes Greg’s response moments later and John’s chin drops to his chest as he huffs out a breath. Lovely.

But wait – when Greg says, “That’s what they all say,” does he mean his actors in general or with Sherlock in particular? That’s a big distinction and John finds his fixation on it more than a bit disconcerting. Why does he care if Sherlock has a habit of shagging costars? It’s not like they’ll be falling into bed anytime soon. Despite their progress tonight, Sherlock is still warming to him at a glacial pace. It’s hardly conducive to any sort of romantic attachment. Not that John wants that anyway. Of course not.

Bloody hell.

In fact, the only person that knows John even looks in that direction, apart from his ex, James, is Harry. And he’s sure the various producers and casting directors of the city would prefer it remain that way, even though it would certainly get Broadway bloggers’ tongues wagging.

And so lost in his thoughts is he that he’s standing before Sherlock’s door before he even registers getting off the elevator. Resolving to think about it another time (or not ever, actually), he pockets his phone and raises his fist, banging on the door harder than anyone should at 1:30 in the morning. He can hear classical music coming from within, possibly Bach, but it abruptly cuts off as he bangs again, and footsteps are heard a second before the door opens.

“John?” Sherlock asks, standing there in flannel trousers, grey t-shirt and blue dressing gown, violin and bow held loosely in his hand.

“You play the violin?” he blurts out. Oh of all the things to lead with, he mentally curses. **You came here with a purpose, you moron. Stick to it.**

Sherlock blinks from the man on his doorstep to the instrument in his hand. “Yes?”

John shakes his head and pinches the bridge of his nose in an effort to get himself back on track. “Why did my agent just call me and tell me I’m playing Macbeth?”

“Ah.” Sherlock taps his chin with his bow and stands back, wordlessly inviting John into the flat. John enters cautiously, eyes continually darting to the man in the silk dressing gown as if he’s about to hide in a cake just so he can pop out and tell him this is all a ruse. “Tea?”

“Um, sure, if you’re having some.”

Sherlock makes a noncommital noise and heads to the kitchen, giving John a moment to inspect his surroundings. The apartment smells like an alarming and yet comforting mixture of tobacco, gunpowder, and cinnamon, and John finds himself drawn to the dark oak of the bookcase and the tomes it carries. They range from various Shakespearean hardbacks to Shelley and Byron, and even surprisingly, a few Bronte and Austen editions. The classics far outweigh the contemporary, and John flushes at the thought of his own bookshelf, weighed down by the latest thriller by Grisham or
Brown. Hardly intellectually strenuous.

“See anything you like?” Sherlock asks as he enters and John jumps, stepping away from the books and shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Sorry. Snooping.”

“By all means, snoop away.” He places a tray of tea down on the coffee table. “I, too, always find myself drawn to other people’s books.”

“I’m afraid you’d not find anything to your liking on my shelf,” John says with his usual self-deprecating air.

“Oh, I hardly believe that,” Sherlock replies, standing up straight. “You use books as an escape. There’s no wrong book to escape to.”

John cocks his head, smiling softly. Sherlock can be wrong about many things, but when he’s right, boy is he ever right.

“Now,” the man says, clapping his hands together. “I believe you’ve come here to verbally spar with me about why we’ve switched roles, so let’s begin since we both have a big day tomorrow and many new lines to learn.”

John stands agape, the fight whooshing out of him like air from a balloon. “So, Mike wasn’t drunk when he called me?”

“I very much hope not. Though it is Saturday, so who can really know for sure.” Sherlock smiles and flops down in his leather chair, hugging his mug of tea close to his chest as if for warmth.

“And Greg was right? This – this really was your idea?”

“Most good ideas are,” he drawls, taking a sip.

“But…” John gives an aborted shrug, “why?”

And only then does Sherlock seem to straighten and take the conversation at hand seriously. “Because you deserve this part.”

“But it’s yours.”

“Wrong. It was mine. And I’m now giving it to its rightful owner.”

“Sherlock –”

“John, do not fight me on this. You will not win.”

John opens and closes his mouth but nothing comes out. “I still don’t understand. Actors aren’t exactly known for being so…”

“Selfless?”

“Magnanimous.”

“Well, two words one would hardly use to describe me, now would they.”

John snorts. “So again, I ask, ‘why?’”
And for the second time that evening, something vulnerable passes across Sherlock’s features. Something young and lost and indefinable that John hasn’t seen since his attempted apology.

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t know. But I trust it.” Sherlock’s eyes drag across the carpet before locking onto John. “I suppose the question then becomes: Can you find it in yourself to trust me?”

John is silent for a beat but the answer echoes in his head true enough. “Yes. Of course I trust you.” And Sherlock smiles – a genuine, true smile – and John wonders when he started to be able to tell the difference. “God help you then.”

He laughs and nods. “God help me indeed.”

“So, Thane of Cawdor…shall we?” he asks, standing and holding out his hand. John’s eyes flick down to it for a moment and when he grips it tightly, he feels a thrill in his stomach he hasn’t felt since he went off to war.

“Oh god, yes.”

xxxxxx

Sally takes a sip of her coffee as she goes over the rehearsal plan for the day, occasionally glancing up to make sure Clara is setting out the correct rehearsal props.

“Are we working with swords today?” she asks and Sally shakes her head.

“No, the fight choreographer is coming on Tuesday to work with the boys.”

Clara nods and leaves the swords in their box as she sets up the table for the banquet scene. It’s early, yet. Not gone 8:30am and everyone won’t begin to arrive until at least 9:45am. Sally likes this time because it allows her a moment of peace and organization before the day makes everything go to complete and utter shit. Her coffee smells of hazelnut and she inhales deeply, relishing the calm before the veritable storm.

“Hiya,” Molly greets as she enters the rehearsal room, arms nearly giving out under the weight of the binders in her arms, and immediately Sally’s stage manager Spidey-sense pings.

“What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” Molly squeaks and now even Clara has stopped setting up the room, cocking her head and staring at the assistant director with a raised eyebrow. Molly’s gaze darts between them for a moment, looking like an animal caught in a trap. “He said he’d call you.”

Sally places her hands on her hips. “Who? Greg?”

Molly nods and Sally takes a step towards her. She takes a step back.

“And why can’t you tell me what has you wound tighter than a Swiss watch?”

“Because – because it’s really something that should come from the director…” Molly backs up some more and nearly trips over the props Clara has laid out.

“Are we folding? I know Martha Hudson didn’t pull the money. She wouldn’t do that.”

“Are we getting sacked?” Clara pipes up and Molly shakes her head as she darts around the room, Sally hot on her heels. They must look like six-year-olds, but she’s taking much too much delight in
torturing the poor AD.

“Fine! Fine! Hold on,” Molly stops running and digs around in her pocket until she gets a hold of her phone and rapidly punches in the numbers. “Hi,” she begins briskly, “You have to tell them, tell them right now, because if you don’t, I will cave under peer pressure.”

Sally smiles smugly as Molly passes the phone over a moment later with a glare and a muttered, “Unnecessary.”

“Hello?”

“Sal, why are you torturing my AD?”

“Because it’s easy,” Sally replies through laughter. “All in good fun, Greg, I promise,” she adds with a wink in Molly’s direction. The AD just rolls her eyes as Clara pats her on the back. “So what’s this big news?”

She can hear him inhale deeply and she has a moment of *Oh perhaps this isn’t a laughing matter at all,* before he blurts out, “Sherlock and John are switching roles.”

And the smile slides from Sally’s face.

“I’m sorry, what?”

xxxxxx

John clears his throat and adjusts his bag on his shoulder, having not felt this nervous for a rehearsal since day one of his first West End role. Last night was all fine and good and *weird,* but this – this is reality. And reality is fucking petrifying.

He can hear laughter around the corner – likely Sean (Macduff) and Andrew (Banquo) horsing around, a common occurrence John can only hope doesn’t end up in another sprained ankle – but the low murmurs are doing nothing for his confidence.

Get it together, man, he thinks to himself, shaking his head and practically forcing his feet to move towards the door. He’s fought a war. He’s been *shot.* Surely, this can’t be worse. And yet –

He crosses the threshold and a hush falls over the entire room as if someone had just hit the ‘mute’ button. Right.

Then, one by one, people start to clap – some even tossing out a joking, "O captain, my captain!" – and, as ridiculous as it is, John can't help but get slightly choked up as the cacophony builds and builds, washing over him like a warm summer rain. He honestly wasn't sure how people would take to his promotion, but, well, it seems to be going quite well. He brushes it off with a "ha ha," and a sincere "Ta," and yet he can't help what Sherlock will think of it all. Will they be just as pleased to see him?

He finds out two minutes later when the man himself walks in and, to the shock of absolutely everyone, gets quite the same reaction. There are catcalls and wolf whistles and various “Milady”s which are enough to make the man blush down to his roots. Sherlock ducks his head and it’s a miracle he doesn’t trip over a wayward set piece as he ploughs his way towards the corner where they keep their belongings.

John’s pouring himself some coffee when he feels the presence over his shoulder and he turns slightly to find Sherlock hovering and – oh god – shuffling his feet?
"What's wrong?"

"Are you okay?" Sherlock asks and John's eyebrows hit his hairline.

"Are you okay?"

"I am if you are."

And John feels like he's referring to more than just the switching of parts.

"Well," he shrugs, "I can't help but feel like I got the better end of the deal."

And something that looks like a smile but clearly goes much deeper crosses Sherlock's face. "Oh I can assure you that's not true."

There's a glint in his eye and John shakes his head, chuckling slightly. "Whatever you say, you madman."

The teasing endearment rolls easily off the tongue and John allows himself only a moment of embarrassment before he sidles up to Greg, well away from the piercing gaze of the man at the breakfast table.

"All right?" Greg asks and John shrugs.

"I have no idea. Ask me in an hour."

Greg laughs and claps him on the back. "Well, if it makes you feel better, I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

John's jaw drops a bit and Greg nods.

"Once Sherlock put it in my brain, it wouldn't leave. It's the right choice. The great choice. Honestly, I wish I could take credit, but I guess that's why we pay Sherlock the big bucks." He grabs his shoulder once more, but this time his hand lingers and he squeezes, as if trying to pour every ounce of confidence and trust into the pressure of those five fingers.

John finds it remarkably reassuring. "Thanks, Greg."

Greg gives him one final look that seems to say If you're having seconds thoughts, now's the time, and when John merely smiles and gives a small nod, the director whistles to bring everyone in.

"Well, I know you've all heard the news by now, but we've had a bit of a switch up." Greg winks in John's direction and he realizes Sherlock has somehow fixated himself next to him in the circle of actors. "John Watson will be playing our Thane of Cawdor and Sherlock Holmes will now be playing his better half."

A round of applause erupts and Sherlock's shoulder, accidentally or not, bumps against him. John flushes.

"So, the banquet scene!" Sally calls as Greg toasts with his cup of coffee.

"Let's feast!"

The actors begin to take their seats and John, acting on autopilot from the overwhelming emotions of the morning, slides into his usual spot.
"John, one over?" Clara smirks and John frowns.

"What?"

"That's my seat." Sherlock's deep rumble comes from his left and he starts.

"Oh, right." He scoots one chair to the right, to Macbeth's, and feels a moment's self-consciousness before sitting up straight and notching his shoulders back. As a king should.

"It suits," Sherlock murmurs as he clears his throat and slides into John's former chair.

And John isn't quite sure what to do with that.

xxxxx

"It suits?" Could you be more ridiculous?

Sherlock curses himself under his breath and bites the inside of his cheek. Idiot.

They’re about to get under way and Sherlock begins to catalogue everyone’s different preparation method to pass the time. Most still have their scripts, himself included due to the recent switch up, and their noses are buried in them, trying to burn as much of the lines into their brains as possible. The man playing Ross is doing some final stretches before taking his seat, Alan (Is that his name? Andrew? Doesn’t matter.) is in the corner amusing Clara by playing Banquo as Jacob Marley, but John on the other hand… John is neither messing around nor memorizing his lines. Rather, he’s staring at the table as if it holds the key to life’s greatest secrets, and Sherlock wonders for a moment whether the past 24 hours have actually made him go ‘round the bend.

“All right,” Greg calls, “John and Sherlock, we’ll start from your entrance and we’ll just mark this. I’ll move you around as we go. And as always, if you have any questions, speak up.”

People nod their understanding and Sherlock takes a breath to calm the sudden uptick of his heart –

But then John reaches over and takes his hand and all of the air leaves the room.

“Shall we?” he asks, standing and pulling Sherlock up with him.

And Sherlock can only dumbly nod in response as he’s led to the corner of the room where tape on the floor marks out what will eventually be a grand staircase.

John’s hand is warm and dry, holding his own with just the right about of pressure: hard enough for Sherlock to feel secure and light enough that he can pull away at any moment. It’s… reassuring, for some unfathomable reason.

“We good?” Greg asks and Sally nods, so he directs his attention to his actors waiting to make their entrances and Sherlock’s heart is positively thunderous.

What the hell was he thinking?

“Breathe,” John whispers and Sherlock audibly inhales, as if he had only been waiting for the command.

The hand on his own tightens for the briefest of moments before John is delivering his first line and Sherlock is utterly gone as the words wash over him.

“You know your own degrees; sit down. At first and last
The hearty welcome."

He should be paying attention, he really should, but he takes a moment to clock the faces around him; the impressed arched eyebrows, the slightly slack jaws, the rare expression of *I knew it*. People have faith in John Watson and he can only hope he garners the same.

When did he start caring about other people’s opinions?

*“Pronounce it for me, sir, to all our friends,*
*For my heart speaks they are welcome.”*

He gets through his first line with great relief and allows John to lead him to the banquet table and pull out his chair, but not before bringing his hand to his lips and placing a light kiss on the inside of his wrist, where his palm meets the beating point of his pulse.

And Sherlock brain short circuits.

He vaguely remembers sitting and sort of knows where they are in the play – that Macbeth is having an aside with three murderers while Lady M holds court at the banquet – but all he can feel are John’s lips against the fragile skin of his wrist, their press burned into his tissue like a brand.

*“Get thee gone. Tomorrow
We’ll hear ourselves again.”*

“… Sherlock? That’s your cue.”

“Oh.” He shakes himself and curses the flights of fancy that have made him seem even the slightest bit unprofessional. “Sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be.” Greg stands and comes around the table, pencil tucked behind his ear as he heads over to John and three of his fellow cast members whose names he has yet to learn. “We’re going to take it back, actually. I want to streamline that entrance.”

Sherlock internally groans, because that might mean another wrist kiss, but one thing he learns over the course of the afternoon is that John Watson never does the same thing twice. At least in rehearsal. The second pass, the gesture is a squeeze to the nape of his neck, fingers threading through the hair there. The third, it’s a caress of his jawline and a little tug on his earlobe. The wrist kiss, though, the wrist kiss is his favorite.

The rehearsal is a bit bumpy considering the two leading men are basically starting all over, but if you ask Sherlock, he’d say it’s going swimmingly. Regardless of any hitches as they get their feet back under them, it clicks. And everyone knows it.

Greg is practically giddy, Molly is smitten with both of them, and Sally looks like she’s finally having fun. Even Ian, their cranky King Duncan is cracking increasingly inappropriate jokes.

Sherlock even grins at a few.

And before he knows it, it’s nearing the lunch break and he finds the seat next to him occupied as John plops down and wipes a bit of sweat from his brow.

“Fun, yeah?”

“That’s one word for it,” he mutters and John frowns.
“You’re not having fun?”

“Oh I am,” he’s quick to assure, because he doesn’t want to see that hurt look on John’s face ever again, “but it’s a terrified kind of fun.”

John leans back and chuckles. “Sherlock Holmes admitting he’s terrified. Pretty sure that’s a first.”

“Pretty sure it is, too,” he murmurs.

John looks at him softly, before turning his focus to the whole of the room and Sherlock breathes a sigh of relief. “Andrew’s doing well,” John says after a moment, nodding to the corner where a bunch of men are gathered.

“… Andrew?”

John’s gaze returns and Sherlock looks at the floor, if only to avoid getting trapped in it. “Do you actually know anyone else’s name? Besides Greg’s and mine?”

“Yes, that’s,” he points at Molly, “Maggie.”

“Wrong,” he replies and Sherlock huffs.

“John, I highly doubt knowing their names will change their opinion of me.”

“And what’s their opinion of you?”

“I’ve never deigned to ask, but I can guess.”

John cocks his head and glances at him with that soft look again and Sherlock squirms under the scrutiny. He nods after a moment and points to the corner.

“That’s Sean. He just got a puppy. Don’t ask him about it though, unless you want to spend ten minutes looking at frankly adorable pictures on his iPhone.”

“Why would I care about his dog?”

John ignores him and points to another man that’s playing one of the murderers. “That’s Kevin. His girlfriend just broke up with him.”

“How’d you deduce that?”

John blinks at him. “… I just asked why he looked sad.”

“Ah.”

John smiles at him, almost in a fond way, before standing and walking over to Greg to chat in low tones. Greg’s eyes flick to Sherlock for a moment and his stomach plummets.

Oh this is not good.

Greg gets a nearly evil glint in his eye and before Sherlock can even properly panic about whether or not he’ll be forced into playing a name game or something equally moronic, Greg is whistling to get everyone’s attention.

“Gents – and ladies,” he amends bowing slightly to Molly, Sally, and Clara, “we’re wrapping up week one and I think it’s time for a bit of cast bonding, whether you like it or not,” he addresses in
Sherlock’s general direction. “Anyone who cares to join, meet us at The Pony Bar on 10th. First round’s on me.”

Various cheers erupt and Sherlock lets out the breath he’d been holding. That’s not so bad, he thinks.

Eight hours later, he’ll learn just how wrong he was.

xxxxxx

The bar feels more like home than he ever thought possible and John leans back against the wooden bench and watches his cast debate over which of the twenty-plus beers offered on tap to get.

Greg slides in next to him and pushes a pint in his direction. “I have no idea what it tastes like, but it was called ‘Does Anybody Remember’ and that was good enough for me.”

John laughs and accepts his brew with a “Cheers,” taking a sip of the dark ale. Oh yes, that’s going to go straight to his head, he knows it.

“I don’t come here enough,” he says after a moment, looking around and Greg nods.

“Good to get a taste of home every now and then. It’s a decent haunt.”

John can’t help but agree, his eyes landing on Sherlock huddled in a corner and being forced into conversation by Molly, if going by the frankly alarming look of discomfort on his face.

“How’d you wind up together?”

Greg follows his gaze and snorts. “Walked right up to me while I was in previews for Merchant and, bold as brass, said, ‘You’re directing Romeo and Juliet at Stratford and I should be your lead.’

“He did not,” John laughs, and yet, it sounds like a very Sherlock thing to do.

“Oh he did. I thought to myself, ‘Who the hell does this kid think he is?’ and I brushed him off – told him I was attempting to put up a show at the National Theatre at the moment and he should piss the hell off – but then a day later, I placed him.” Greg takes a sip of his beer and nods in Sherlock’s direction. “He had done Lucky in Godot here, but before that, he did a Sarah Kane in Soho while still in school. Godot was incredible, but Cleansed, that was bloody brilliant.”

John promptly chokes on his beer. “He was in Cleansed?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I was doing a rock musical literally in the same building.” His eyes find Sherlock once more, now looking like he’s in actual physical pain, and tries to place him in a decades old memory. “Never got to see it, of course. We were always performing at the same time.”

“Small world, eh?” Greg asks, jostling his arm.

“Yeah, small.” The beer is warming his stomach, which is both a welcome and disconcerting feeling. “Why does he call her Mrs. Hudson? Why not Martha?” he asks after a moment, the question just popping into his head as most things involving Sherlock do.

“Old family friend,” Greg replies. “The only person who will fund his projects anymore. Producers were getting sick and tired of Sherlock pulling a ‘Holmes’ and losing them all their money.”

“Really? It’s actually called, ‘Pulling a Holmes?’”
“Oh yeah. I think it’s made it into the Equity handbook by now.”

John barks out a laugh and takes a sip of his pint, watching as Sean pushes a stout into Sherlock’s hand. “Oh that won’t end well.”

Greg catches his meaning and shrugs. “I actually prefer a tipsy Sherlock. It rarely happens, but when it does, he’s actually less of a tosser than usual.”

John snorts and watches as Sherlock sniffs and then takes a sip.

Sean leans down as he passes by their table, whispering, “It’s the 11.2%.” He gives them both a thumbs up as Greg groans.

“Christ, I am not pouring him into a cab at the end of the night. He’s your husband, you do it.” Greg claps John on the back and he swallows a noise, taking a large gulp of his pint and signaling for Andrew to order him another.

It’s going to be a long night.

xxxxxx

He swears the floor is slanted.

He’s not sure if it’s a fault in the foundation or an artistic choice but, as he stumbles his way towards the door, Sherlock knows there’s a definitely a slope to this establishment.

“Easy, easy,” John murmurs as strong arms wrap around his waist. He thinks John is drunk, there’s a slight slur to his voice and the breath in his ear smells like ale, but his arms seem stable enough and Sherlock sinks into them a bit.

“This floor is defective, John.”

“I agree.”

“It should be brought up to Health and Safety.”

“Absolutely.”

He vaguely registers Sean taking a picture with his phone, before John ushers him out the door and into the crisp night air. Sadly, it does nothing to sober the frenetic thoughts in his head.

“I’m not a bad person,” he says as he turns in John’s arms, inadvertently colliding the shorter man’s face with his chest.

“No one said you were a bad person,” John replies as he pulls back, hands never leaving Sherlock’s waist, which Sherlock is grateful for because he’s pretty sure they’re the only things keeping him upright at the moment.

“You kissed my wrist,” he blurts out and John laughs, before frowning and tilting his head.

“I did. Was that bad? It seemed the natural thing to do, us being married and all.”

“No, it was fine. Good, goody good – ”

“But…?” John prompts and Sherlock curses the alcohol coursing through his system for lowering his inhibitions.
“I’ve never done that not onstage,” he admits, attempting to step away from the man in front of him and backing into the street light instead.

John quickly follows, grabbing hold of him once more and steadying him. “You mean you’ve never had a kiss that’s not been onstage?”

“Nope,” he replies, popping the ‘p.’

“Sherlock! How…?” John trails off and shakes his head as Sherlock shrugs.

“I don’t exactly endear people to me.”

John stares at him the way Sherlock examines his scripts: with a kind of curiosity, challenge, and hunger. It makes his mouth go dry.

“Are we in a rehearsal room?” John asks, glancing up and down the street.

Sherlock shakes his head and waits a moment for his vision to straighten itself out once more. “Not last I checked.”

John smiles halfway, the right side of his mouth tugging up just a bit, as he takes Sherlock’s hand.

“People will talk,” Sherlock breathes when he realizes just what the man in front of him is about to do.

“They hardly do anything else,” John quietly replies before pressing a kiss to the pulse point giving away Sherlock’s rapidly beating heart. “See? Wasn’t so bad.”

“Inconclusive,” is all he gets out before he cups John’s face and crashes their lips together.

Chapter End Notes

- The Pony Bar is real. It's on 45th and 10th Ave in Hell's Kitchen and if you're a beer connoisseur, it's the place to be.
Confusion Now Hath Made His Masterpiece

Chapter Summary

“I did something stupid,” John admits and Harry snorts.

“Uh oh. On a scale of minor embarrassment to apocalyptic catastrophe, how bad was it?”

He bites his lip and tries to quell the roiling of his stomach. “More the latter, less the former.”

“Oh boy. I’ll be over in a bit.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Confusion now hath made his masterpiece.”

- Macbeth, Act II, Scene 3

BAIT AND SWITCH

Leads in Broadway’s Upcoming Macbeth Trade Roles

Word on the street (the Great White one) is that Tony nominee Sherlock Holmes and music man John Watson are trading parts. Holmes, whose casting in the title role of Macbeth was announced late last summer, was joined by Watson in the role of Lady Macbeth last December. But it seems as if those of us in the press spoke too soon, despite the fact that rehearsals for the production, opening April 21st, began last week.

It’s now been announced that Holmes will take on the role of Lady Macbeth with John Watson headlining. When asked for a reason for the uncommonly late switch, lead producer Martha Hudson stated, “Our focus is on presenting the best possible Macbeth for our audiences and after a week of rehearsals, we realized that the best performances we could give might involve a bit of a trade. Both boys are delighted and we couldn’t be happier or more excited for audiences to see their work. I think they’ll surprise you.” Holmes, known for his stoicism, is a Shakespeare stalwart, but this is Watson’s first foray into the works of the Bard.

The revival, directed by Tony Award-winner Greg Lestrade, features an all male cast led by Holmes, Watson, Tony nominee Sean Fagan, and Broadway veteran Ian Clarke.

Performances begin March 27th at the St. James Theatre.

xxxxxx

Dear god, this must be what death feels like. Only a lot more horrifying, infinitely more painful, and despairingly more dehydrated than usual.
Sherlock groans and buries his face in the pillow, willing the sun to set once more with what little mental faculties he has at his disposal. Whoever invented alcohol should be hanged. Castrated and then hanged, Sherlock decides as he moans something unintelligible, blindly reaching for the mobile he really hopes is on the bedside table. He honestly can’t remember where he left it and he’s in too much pain to open his eyes and look.

Eventually his fingers connect with something small and metallic, and he pulls the device onto his pillow and manages to hit a button, squinting an eye open and promptly cursing not only at the light, but also at the time: 9:48am. That’s at least three hours later than he normally wakes on a day off.

His mouth feels like it’s full of cotton balls and his head full of elves wielding pickaxes, but he manages to sit up (no small feat) and get his legs over the side of the bed, taking a moment to acclimate them to solid ground. The hardwood floor is refreshing, if a little daunting to traverse. The door is, after all, all the way across the room.

With a groan, he pushes himself up to standing, swaying slightly as he grabs hold of the curtain, using it to guide himself across the floor with all the agility of a baby deer learning how to walk.

The creak of the door hinge sounds like a jackhammer and he pinches the bridge of his nose as he blindly stumbles into the living room, opening his eyes far too abruptly when he hears what can only be described as a giggle across the room.

“John?” he asks, startled to find the man himself sitting on his couch, currently putting his shoes on.

“Morning, sunshine.”

“What – ” he rubs his eyes, but no, the man is still there, “what are you doing here?”

And something in John’s face shutters. “You don’t remember?”

“Remember what? We were… at a bar? I remember beer. Lots of beer.”

“Sherlock – ”

“And a defective floor,” he murmurs, flopping down onto his chair with a lot less grace than normal.

“Well,” John says after a moment, “there’s photographic evidence, so at least you have that going for you.” He holds up his phone with a smile plastered on his face, but Sherlock can hear the forced joviality in his tone. “Sean texted it to me last night.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re in my apartment. And,” he glances at the blanket on the sofa, “sleeping on my couch.”

John stands and tosses the phone in Sherlock’s lap. “Because you asked me to, you tosser.” Gone is the smile, fake though it was, and that perhaps hurts more than the hangover.

Oh. He asked John to stay. And, if going by the look on John’s face, he asked a lot more than that. He glances at the phone and squints one eye to find a picture of himself and John laughing as John holds him around the waist. Even through the shoddy resolution, he can tell that they’re both soused.

And yet completely unguarded. Happy, even.

He hasn’t seen that kind of joy on his face in a very long while.

“I made tea,” John continues, interrupting his thoughts. “And there’s paracetamol on the table. I’m
gonna…” he shoves his hands in his pockets and gestures towards the door with his head.

“John…” he breathes deeply and holds the phone out, knowing it will force the other man to come near him once more to retrieve it. John steps forward after a minute and his fingers close around the device, but Sherlock doesn’t let go yet. “If I did anything untoward, I am sorry. I am not often inebriated.”

John gently tugs the phone from Sherlock’s hand and slides it into his pocket. “Nothing happened. Don’t worry about it.”

But something in his tone has Sherlock not quite believing him. John stares at him for a moment before offering a sharp, soldierly nod and heading for the door.

A door which opens to reveal Irene Adler just as he gets to it, causing John to pull up short.

“You,” she blurts, nearly dropping the cappuccino in her hand as she pockets Sherlock’s spare key. He really should hide it better.

“Lovely to see you again,” John replies before turning back to Sherlock. “You should eat something.” He offers a poor attempt at a tight smile, nods at Irene, and heads out the open door. The ding of the lift signals his departure a moment later.

Irene is fixing him with a look that’s a mixture of disbelief, anger, and admiration, but Sherlock can only focus on the heavy feeling that’s settled in his gut. A feeling that has nothing to do with the amount of alcohol he drank the night prior.

Much to his consternation, it feels remarkably like regret.

xxxxxx

John welcomes the cold air that hits his face as he exits Sherlock’s building and heads for the subway, willing the slight headache he has to disappear as he punches in Harry’s number, momentarily ignoring the text from Aaron that reads, Congrats, mate! Read the news on Playbill!

“Are we in a rehearsal room?”

“Not last I checked.”

“Johnny, boy!” Harry’s voice trills her usual greeting and John groans at the sound.

“Quieter, please.”

“Aw, did someone have a little too much fun last night?” She always takes great delight in his bad decisions, especially since she can’t blame alcohol for any of her own, and he wonders for a moment if calling her was the best idea.

But, sod it all, he needs someone to talk to and it sure as hell won’t be Sherlock Holmes.

“I did something stupid,” he admits and she snorts.

“Uh oh. On a scale of minor embarrassment to apocalyptic catastrophe, how bad was it?”

He bites his lip and tries to quell the roiling of his stomach. “More the latter, less the former.”

“Oh boy. I’ll be over in a bit.”
“It’s a Monday. Aren’t you at work?”

“It’s a bank holiday. Or whatever the Americans call them these days.”

“I think they’re just called ‘holidays.’”

“How unoriginal,” she drawls. “Let me grab a few things and I’ll come ‘round.”

“Ta. You’re a good little sister.”

“I know.”

She hangs up and he breathes deeply, trying to ignore the images assaulting his mind as he descends into the labyrinth of New York’s public transit system.

Sherlock’s lips fit perfectly against his own, despite the clumsy job they’re both doing of remaining upright. His heart is absolutely thunderous as Sherlock breathes softly against his tongue, fingers threading through the hair at the back of his neck.

“You sure you’ve never done this before?” John whispers as he pulls away enough to see Sherlock’s face, a face which is looking at him with something akin to wonder.

“Trust me. I’d remember.”

John swallows hard and harshly runs his Metrocard through the turnstile, blaming the stinging of his eyes on the aftereffects of the beer.

“We shouldn’t do this,” he whispers and Sherlock nods emphatically.

“Absolutely. Bad idea,” he replies, even as he dives in again, pressing John back against the street light, eliciting a moan John makes a note to be embarrassed about later.

“Sherlock.” The name is muffled against the man’s lips and John chuckles against them as Sherlock keeps trying to outmaneuver him for another snog. “Come on, Drunky McGee,” John manages, clamping a hand over Sherlock’s mouth. “Into a cab.”

Sherlock shakes his head and John can’t help but think he looks gorgeous in the soft yellow light of the lamp above their heads.

“Well you can’t sleep on the street. The NYPD frowns on that sort of thing.”

Sherlock licks his hand and John yelps, glaring at him as Sherlock offers a devilish smile. “Come with me.”

“Absolutely not,” John replies, relieved to know that the angels in his head are managing to shout down the demons on his shoulder.

“But I need help, John! The sidewalk has not been paved properly! I can’t possibly make it home without falling and Lady M cannot be bloody. Not yet anyway.” He laughs at his own joke and John can’t help but follow suit.

And then Sherlock pouts and John feels his resolve crumbling faster than the walls of Pompeii.

“Christ. Fine, I’ll take you home, you bloody menace. But keep your hands to yourself.”

John takes a seat on the 1 train and drops his head in his hands.
He’s in so much trouble.

xxxxx

Irene calmly closes the door and Sherlock winces, already bracing for the inevitable.

“Are you mad?” she yells, turning the lock with more force than necessary. “Have you actually snipped the thin tether you still had on your sanity?”

“Irene, a lower decibel, please. For the love of god.”

“No, Sherlock!” She stalks over to him and drops The New York Times on his lap. "Look, I like juicy gossip as much as the next girl, but you cannot screw this up. I know people in theatre bed-hop like a frat boy at an American university, but he's your castmate, your costar – your bloody Macbeth now, thanks to you! You cannot shag him.”

"I didn't. I – I haven’t."

"No?" she scoffs, not catching on to just how deep that confession went. “Then why is he leaving your apartment at ten in the morning looking like a kicked puppy while you look like you’ve been hit by a lorry?"

"Because I asked him to stay. Apparently," he adds. And his voice must give him away – he's usually more careful than that, more guarded – but her glare softens and she tilts her head, as if really looking at him for the first time that morning.

"Oh, Sherlock."

"Don’t,” he snaps. “You know I detest pity."

"Well, it's not pity for the hangover if that's what you think,” she mutters, taking a seat on the couch and crossing her legs as she studies him with that unscrupulous gaze. “You know I adore you in a love/hate kind of way, but if you hurt John Watson, I will never forgive you.”

“Playing favorites?” And if it comes out a little more petulant than he intends, he blames it on the dehydration.

“No. Merely noting that if you break the heart of the most likeable man on Broadway, you’ll be even more ostracized that you already are. And that doesn’t give me much to work with.”

Sherlock snorts and shakes his head, not caring that it sets his hangover recovery back hours. “What are you talking about? John is straight.”

“Oh, Sherlock,” she repeats and, this time, it’s a lot more mocking. “For someone who claims to see things that other people don’t, you’re remarkably blind.”

“Oh and you’d know all about John Watson, hm?” Sherlock snaps, standing and gulping down the paracetamol that John left before stalking to the window, if only to hide the nauseated look that crosses his face. “He and that woman – ”

“Mary Morstan?”

“ – broke up only a few months ago.”

“Look at you: paying attention to people’s personal lives. It’s almost as if you care.” Irene raises a perfectly arched eyebrow and Sherlock sneers. “I might not know all about John Watson, but I can
tell what he likes. And this morning, it certainly wasn’t you.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he mutters, pulling his dressing gown tighter around himself as if it were armor.

“Last night, though…” she trails off, leaving the insinuation hanging heavily in the air. “But then, you can’t remember what happened, can you.” It’s not a question.

“Leave it, Irene,” he replies. Begs, even. Gone is his usual bite and, in its place, mere resignation.

He hangs his head and presses his sweaty forehead to the cool glass.

What has he done?

xxxxxx

John remembers to text Aaron back his thanks and skims the article on his phone as he wrestles his keys into the door. His bag falls from his shoulder and he leaves it where it falls in the middle of the room as he makes his way into his kitchen to pour himself the largest glass of water he’s ever consumed.

How could he be such an idiot? Granted, it’s not like he’s the one who initiated the frankly epic snog, but still. He did sort of kickstart the proceedings with that ridiculous (and ridiculously hot) wrist kiss.

He can still feel Sherlock’s pulse against his lips if he closes his eyes and actually concentrates. It’s incredibly distracting.

Knock, knock. “John, open up. I know you hate to panic alone.” Harry’s voice is a welcome respite and he thanks the Manhattan realty gods for allowing them to find apartments relatively close to one another.

He opens the door and Harry beams, holding up a bag full of omelet fixings and a box of Alka-Seltzer.

“Bless you,” he murmurs, ushering her inside as he leans down to accept a kiss on the cheek.

“First, breakfast. Then you can tell me all about your horrendous evening.”

“Lovely,” he groans, collapsing on the sofa and accepting the fizzy glass of water she shoves in his hand a moment later.

She (mercifully) leaves the interrogation off until his food’s at least been swallowed, if not digested, before she tucks her legs under her on the other side of the couch and fixes him with a look that says, ‘Talk.’

There’s a moment’s silence before the admission comes tumbling from him:

“I snogged Sherlock last night.”

And her eyes go comically wide like a character in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, as her jaw drops.

“What?”

“Ah, easy. Still not so loud.”

“You can’t tell me you snogged Sherlock Holmes and then ask me to be quiet! That’s not how it
works!”

“Technically, he snogged me.”

“John!” She tosses a pillow at him and it hits him square in the face before falling to the floor.

“We were drunk.”

“No sympathy from the recovering alcoholic there.”

He winces, but she nudges him with her toes to show she’s only teasing.

“So… how’d it happen?” she asks, leaning forward like she’s at a slumber party. “Was it all fireworks and symphonies or just a drunk snog on a city street?”

John smiles before he even realizes he’s doing it. “Both.”

“Well, look at you,” she murmurs, leaning back once more. “I haven’t seen you this moony since James. Mary came close, though.”

“Mm.” He doesn’t disagree, but he also doesn’t want to dwell. Not on them, at least.

“Cheers!” he calls as he bangs the door to the cab closed, manhandling Sherlock out of the middle of the street and onto the sidewalk before he gets hit by a car. The madman is too busy staring up at the stars, flailing his arms at the air in an effort to show John Cassiopeia.

“See? It’s an ‘M.” He nearly turns upside down, stumbling into John who attempts to right him. “Or maybe it’s a ‘W.”

“I see it, Sherlock,” John giggles, gently shoving the man towards the front door of his building yet keeping a firm grip on the tails of his coat.

The doorman gives them a bemused smile as he tips his hat, making John briefly wonder how often this happens. Not wanting to think about it, though, he punches the button for the 11th floor when they get to the lift and helps Sherlock eventually find his keys in one of his many pockets, watching intently with no small amount of amusement as Sherlock closes one eye just to fit the key into the lock. What a pair they make.

The door clicks shut behind them and John finds himself pressed against it, the doorknob digging into his back as he’s accosted by Shakespeare’s finest at his front.

“I would like to experiment again,” Sherlock slurs, and John snorts because ‘experiment’ comes out like ‘spurminent’ – but then Sherlock cups his cheeks, studying him with a shocking amount of clarity.

And suddenly John can’t breathe.

“Sherlock.”

“Hm?”

“We shouldn’t do this,” he murmurs, the words clawing at his throat, desperate to stay unsaid.

“Why not? This is a perfectly fine way to spend one’s time. I, for one, am having a lovely evening.” Suddenly he pouts and John’s heart clenches. “Aren’t you?”
“Yes, Sherlock, I’m having a grand time, but…” he maneuvers his way out from between the door and his leading man, before bracing his hands on his hips and attempting to find that stiff British upper lip his father was always going on about.

And despite his protestations, Sherlock seems to know exactly what John’s reservations are. Maybe he even shares a few. Regardless, he’s staring at John like he’s a first folio, and John realizes he never, ever wants Sherlock to look away.

“I should go,” he murmurs, hating every word that passes his lips.

“No, stay here.”

“Sherlock, that’s not a good idea.”

“It is, too. It was my idea, therefore it’s great,” he says resolutely, capping it off with a little head nod, but his smile fades as quickly as it comes. “At least take the couch. The West Village is far.”

And, true, John doesn’t really have any desire to venture back downtown via subway (which is shite this late at night) or cab (his hangover is already settling in and the motion sickness would no doubt overwhelm), so he finds himself nodding and accepting the bedding that Sherlock is shoving into his arms with all the joy of a boy on Christmas morning.

When the bed is made and the pleasantries said, they find themselves standing awkwardly in the middle of the living room, staring at one another because ‘goodnight’ must come next, and ‘goodnight’ is too much.

Sherlock eventually steps forward, crowding him once more, and John’s gaze keeps darting between his eyes and his lips, unable to make up its mind on where to focus. He leans in and John automatically closes his eyes because years of kisses have programmed his brain that way, but when the press of Sherlock’s lips doesn’t come, John blinks them open to find the taller man’s gaze flicking across his face as if trying to memorize it.

“Goodnight, John,” Sherlock murmurs after a moment, voice sounding more sober than it has all night, as his lips ghost, not across his mouth, but his forehead, and the sentimental gesture makes John’s heart ache.

“Goodnight,” he replies.

“John?”

“Hm? Yeah?” He blinks to find Harry sitting across the couch once more, looking at him like he’s grown another head.

“Go take a nap,” she instructs as she tugs him to his feet and nudges him toward the bedroom. “I’ll watch crap telly until you wake.”

“You’re a good sister,” he manages before he faceplants on the bed, pulling the pillow closer to him so he can bury his face in it and smother himself until he forgets what Sherlock Holmes’ lips feel like.

When he wakes three hours later, he still remembers.

xxxxxx

Something’s wrong.
Greg’s eyes narrow as he watches Sherlock and John metaphorically dance around each other, like there’s a steel bar holding them together and when one advances, the other automatically retreats. It’s incredibly hard to stage a play when your leading men, who are supposed to be married, refuse to get within ten feet of each other.

Not only is there that awkwardness, but things are just plain odd. Sherlock knows Kevin’s name for crying out loud, and is actually addressing him by it. What is that about?

They seemed cozy enough at the drinks on Sunday night. In fact, Greg’s positive he’s never seen Sherlock smile so much over a two hour period, and that was well before he managed to get himself truly and properly sauced.

Something’s going on and he’s no detective, but dammit, he will not let it affect his show. There are rules and rule number one is leave that shite on the pavement.

“Oi, John.” Greg beckons him over with a nod of his head and John quickly complies, not noticing that Sherlock’s eyes follow him across the room. “What the hell’s going on with you two?”

“Who two?”

"Don't get coy with me. You're not Lady Macbeth anymore. You know exactly what I mean."

John holds up his hands and replies, "Nothing's going on. Why?" But the answer is far too innocent. Too practiced, like he had been expecting the question and rehearsed it in the mirror fifty times before leaving the loo.

"If something happened, I need to know. Your personal life is not my business, but if it affects my room, it becomes mine. Understand?"

John nods, taking the slight berating much more calmly than Sherlock would. Than he will, because he better believe that he's next on the list.

"Okay. Back to murdering and usurping with you," he says softly, squeezing John's shoulder and nudging him back to the center of the room. Sherlock's eyes watch him the whole way before darting back to Greg.

Greg points at him and curls his finger, beckoning him closer, and Sherlock trudges over like a child about to be put in a time-out.

"Whatever you did, don't do it again."

Sherlock’s jaw drops in indignation. "Why do you always assume it's me?"

Greg fixes him with a look and Sherlock shrugs as if to say, 'Point taken.'

The scene work resumes but Greg knows no one’s mind is on the task at hand: Sean keeps eyeing John and Sherlock like one is about to combust and take the other with them, Kevin is gearing up to break up a fight – any fight – and Clara is chewing the eraser off the end of her pencil.

With is why he calls lunch fifteen minutes early, ignoring the look from Sally that seriously questions his sanity and glaring at his leading men in a way he sincerely hopes conveys his desire to throttle them.

xxxxxx
John zips his coat more harshly than he needs to as he blows out of the glass doors of the studios on 42nd St. and into the throngs of tourists making their way towards Madame Tussaud’s and Ripley’s Believe It or Not.

New York has many draws for him, but 42nd St. is not one of them. It’s a madhouse of street vendors, hawkers, and sometimes, downright thieves – and that’s just during the supposed off-season between New Years and Spring Break.

“You have to tell me what I did wrong,” a voice (that voice) says over his shoulder and he turns to find Sherlock bobbing and weaving – and sometimes colliding – with people in an effort to keep up with John’s shorter, yet determined stride.

“You didn’t do anything,” John mutters, resolutely moving ahead towards his destination three blocks away.

“Clearly I did since you haven’t been able to look me in the eye since Monday morning.”

“Sherlock,” he sighs, “just leave it. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine, John,” he bites out, grabbing John’s arm and stopping him cold in the middle of Times Square. “I don’t like this.”

John exhales and stares at the infamous LED Coca-Cola ad in the heart of the square. “Don’t like what?” he asks, though he most certainly knows the answer.

“This,” Sherlock stresses, gesturing at the small space between them. The small space that seems like such an expanse, here in the middle of the busiest intersection in the world.

“Sherlock, just…” he waves his hands helplessly, “it’s all fine.”

Sherlock’s lips smack shut and he shoves his hands into his pockets, looking like he might want to argue but thinking better of it (for once). John manages a tight smile that almost reaches his eyes this time, nodding gently before stepping away and continuing on to 45th Street – that expanse growing ever wider.

He doesn’t turn around, not until he rounds the corner and catches sight of the restaurant’s neon sign, knowing that when he looks back, Sherlock will be hidden by the ebb and flow of people whose lives must be less complicated than his.

John pushes through the wooden, revolving door harder than necessary, taking a moment to let his eyes adjust to the low light, inhaling the smells of antipasti and homemade tomato sauce.

Movement out of his peripheral vision catches his eye and he cranes his neck to find Mike waving at him from a booth to the right. John raises his hand in return and begins to make his way around the various waitresses and bus boys before shrugging his coat off and sliding into the booth across from his agent.

"Nice choice,” Mike nods as he eyes a passing dessert platter. "Haven't been here in ages."

"It's Harry's favorite," John replies, tucking into the menu and resolutely avoiding his agent's knowing gaze.

And Mike allows him to pretend that all is well for a decent minute and a half before he leans back and takes a sip of his water. "Come on, out with it. Greg and I do talk, you know."
"Like thirteen year old girls, no doubt."

"Oi." Mike kicks him under the table and John's groan turns into a chuckle.

"This isn't rugby anymore. I bruise more easily in my old age," John counters and Mike throws his napkin at him.

"Steady on, I've got two years on you, you git."

John laughs, but Mike then fixes him with the look that usually gets John a pay raise when it’s fixed on a producer.

“So… what’s going on?” he prods again and John shrugs in much the same way Harry used to when John would catch her sneaking out at night.

“Nothing,” he replies, hating the way he sounds eight-years-old once more and Mike points his fork at him.

“John Hamish Watson, don’t lie to me. I visited you in hospital when they were still digging shrapnel out of your shoulder.”

John squirms under the scrutiny before putting his menu down with a sigh. The man does have a point after all. “What’s Greg been telling you?”

“That you don’t talk to each other – hell, that you won’t even look at each other,” Mike says, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table, looking at him with something resembling disappointment. “You’ve never been my problem client. The very model of geniality, you are.”

“I know.”

“Then what’s going on?”

“Sherlock kissed me,” he blurts out and Mike’s eyes widen. “What?”

“We were drunk and he kissed me, and he doesn’t remember a thing.” The words are warm in his stomach yet they twist painfully.

“And you remember everything,” Mike murmurs and, after a moment, John nods. “It’s not the first costar you’ve snogged. In fact, you have a reputation for going a lot farther – one I’m trying to rectify, by the way.”

“This is different,” John snaps, immediately regretting his tone.

“How?” Mike asks. “Other than the fact that he’s a bloke, which FYI, doesn’t phase me in the slightest.”

John chuckles and looks at Mike gratefully. “I know it doesn’t. And no, I don’t know how it’s different.”

“It just is?”

“It just is.”

“I can work with that,” Mike replies, before adding, “But get your head out of your arse and do the
work.” Then he signals for the waiter, burying his nose in his menu like it’s back to business as usual.

And John loves him a bit for that.

xxxxxx

Greg watches as Sherlock sits in the corner of the rehearsal room in a chair far too small for his method of perching: legs pulled up to his chest, hunched over with his chin on his knees like a wounded bird.

Sally keeps eying him like he’s a minute away from opening the window and jumping out, but really – he’s not that dramatic, Greg knows. Not today, at least.

They’ve dismissed the rest of the cast to work solely on the bloody, lustful Act II Scene 2 – Duncan’s murder – and Greg is watching his leading men like they’re about to bolt or puke. Or puke and then bolt.

John is pacing in the corner, murmuring his lines to himself and Sherlock – well, Sherlock hasn’t moved in twenty-six minutes. Not since he came back from their lunch break early, looking like someone had just stolen his lunch money.

“You good?” Greg asks as he strolls up to him and Sherlock nods because he’s a professional, but internally, his heart must be beating faster than a hummingbird’s if his shaking hands are anything to go by.

Hell, Greg’s directed him through a full nude scene and Sherlock has never exhibited this kind of unease. He’d call it pedestrian if he were in any state to analyze himself.

“Gents? We ready?” he calls towards John in the corner and his Macbeth gives him the same short, stilted nod he received from Sherlock not a minute ago. “All right. Let’s get to it, then. Actually, John, I think we’ll take it from your monologue at the end of scene 1 before the murder, if it’s all the same to you.”

John snorts. “Absolutely. I need all the practice I can get.”

Greg chuckles and even Sherlock cracks a smile as he moves off to the side, rolling his shoulders a few times as he waits to make his entrance.

John’s back straightens into his usual military stance and Greg takes his seat next to Molly at the table, patiently remaining silent until his leading man is ready.

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee,” he whispers, reaching out for something that isn’t there.

“I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?” John grabs at his head and crouches down, groaning into the ground like a man grasping at his very last strands of sanity.

“I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.”

John is a thing of beauty, portraying a kind of mad, yet terrified zeal that Greg hasn’t seen onstage
since McKellen did Richard III at the Almeida two decades ago. He has to remind himself to pay
attention and not get caught up because it’s mesmerizing to say the least: this chameleon before him.
And before he knows it, John is winding down his speech, and Greg looks at his blank notepad,
realizing he has no corrections to give him. He’ll be out of a job if they keep this up.

“I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan;” he begs to the sky, “for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.”

John swiftly goes off stage right as Sherlock enters stage left. He’s stripped off his jumper and stalks
the stage in nothing but his black jeans and white t-shirt. Greg likens him to a feral cat, a comparison
befitting the formidable Lady M.

“That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;
What hath quench’d them hath given me fire.
Hark! Peace!” he snaps, pausing as he glances at the ceiling, listening for any sound.
It was the owl that shriek’d, the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern'st good-night. He is about it:
The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms
Do mock their charge with snores: I have drugg'd
their possets,
That death and nature do contend about them,
Whether they live or die.”


Sherlock resumes his pacing, running his fingers through his hair and clutching at the strands,
tugging none too gently.

“Alack, I am afraid they have awaked,
And ’tis not done. The attempt and not the deed
Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready;
He could not miss ‘em. Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done’t.”

John enters again and they stare at one another in a way that makes Greg’s breath catch. The tension
in the room has notched up a thousand and even Molly, who makes script notes like a student
fiendishly studying for a final, halts her pen.

“My husband,” Sherlock croaks and Greg honestly isn’t sure if that was an acting choice or not.

“I have done the deed,” John murmurs, “Didst thou not hear a noise?”

The scene brings Greg back to John’s initial audition – where the sparks flew and the chemistry was
there before there had even been a single rehearsal. Much like that day, they’re volleying lines back
and forth like they’re Centre Court at Wimbledon.

“This is a sorry sight,” John says to his hands, which will eventually be covered in blood.

“A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight.” Sherlock steps forward and takes John’s hands in his own,
turning them over and tracing the lines that run from his palms to the veins of his wrist.

“There’s one did laugh in’s sleep, and one cried
‘Murder!’
That they did wake each other: I stood and heard them; 
But they did say their prayers, and address'd them 
Again to sleep.” John shakes his head and Sherlock cups his cheeks.

“There are two lodged together.”

“One cried ‘God bless us!’ and ‘Amen’ the other; 
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands. 
Listening their fear, I could not say ‘Amen,’
When they did say ‘God bless us!’” John chokes out, allowing Sherlock to push him gently onto the makeshift bed behind him, which is just the instinct Greg hoped he’d have.

“Consider it not so deeply,” Sherlock breathes, climbing on top of John and straddling his thighs, tilting his chin up to run his thumb across his cheek.

Greg can visibly see John swallow from across the room. Again, he’s not entirely sure that was an acting choice.

“But wherefore could not I pronounce ‘Amen’?” John whispers, voice hiccupping over the words. “I had most need of blessing, and ‘Amen’ Stuck in my throat.”

And then Sherlock leans down and kisses said throat, lips trailing over a bobbing Adam’s apple until he reaches the other man’s jaw.

“These deeds must not be thought 
After these ways; so, it will make us mad,” he murmurs against the stubbled skin before connecting their lips –

And it’s all Greg can do not to give a little fist pump, because that is a scene. The kind of scene people will be talking about in reviews to come. He’s about to have them hold for a moment so they can go back and rework, but before he can, Sherlock freezes, pulling away from John so abruptly, he nearly topples himself backwards off John’s lap.

“Oh,” he breathes and Greg frowns, checking his script, but nope, Shakespeare didn’t quite write that utterance into the text. And for a scholar like Sherlock who follows every one of Shakespeare’s punctuations to a T, something must be terribly, terribly wrong. “Oh, I remember…”

“What? Remember what?” Greg asks, interrupting the scene because clearly whatever’s happening has moved beyond the Macbeths’ bedroom.

John is holding tight to Sherlock’s waist, yet he looks… scared? Scared can’t be the right word.

“Oh god,” Sherlock mutters again before stumbling to standing and tripping over John’s legs. “I’m so sorry.”

He bolts to the hallway before Greg can even begin to wrap his head around what he’s just witnessed and, before he can get a word in edgewise, John is racing to his feet and sprinting out the door after him –

Because, as it’s become plain to see, wherever Sherlock Holmes goes, John Watson is sure to follow.

Chapter End Notes
- The restaurant John and Mike go to is called Bond 45 on 45th between 6th and 7th Aves. It's a theatre haunt and very good. Old school New York.
- The Almeida is a theatre in London.
Stars, Hide Your Fires

Chapter Summary

“So,” John whispers, “I need you to stop freaking out because I can literally see the panic in your eyes.”

“I was awful,” comes spilling out of Sherlock’s mouth and John shakes his head.

“You weren’t awful. The complete opposite, in fact.”

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Stars, hide your fires,  
Let not light see my black and deep desires.”  
- Macbeth, Act I, Scene 4

John, John, John, John.

Sherlock only has room for those four letters in his magnificent brain as they repeat themselves over and over, expanding and spreading throughout his entire being until there’s hardly room for air in his lungs.

Somewhere he hears a door slam but he can hardly focus because oh god this must be what a panic attack feels like. He rests his palms against the orange wall and closes his eyes tight, attempting to squeeze out the memories that are returning to him unbidden:

The door clicks shut behind them and he presses John up against the frame, wincing in sympathy as the knob prods into John’s back.

“I would like to experiment again,” he hears himself slur, and John snorts – an utterly adorable sound that has Sherlock cupping the other man’s cheeks, stubble prickling palms of his skin. And it is suddenly imperative that he knows exactly where this man came from and how he wandered into Sherlock’s life.

He feels a hand on his arm and he manages to override his baser instincts and not shrug it off.

“Sherlock?”

“Hm?”

“We shouldn’t do this,” John murmurs, sounding like the words are the absolute last things he wants to say. Sherlock can’t help but agree.

“When not? This is a perfectly fine way to spend one’s time. I, for one, am having a lovely evening. Aren’t you?” he asks, the question making his stomach plummet most unpleasantly.

“Yes, Sherlock, I’m having a grand time, but…” John slips from beneath Sherlock’s fingertips and moves away from the door, the wool and leather of his coat getting tangled in Sherlock’s searching
grasp.

Of course there’s a ‘but.’ There’s always a ‘but,’ and Sherlock hates the loathsome word, deciding to delete it from his mind palace.

“Sherlock,” John says again, squeezing his arm this time, but Sherlock can’t turn around. Not yet.

“I should go,” John whispers after a moment and Sherlock bites back a curse.

“No, stay here.”

He had asked him to stay. Begged him, even. And the following morning, he treated him like it was John’s fault – John’s idea – that he followed him home. That he knapped on the couch. That he bloody kissed him. When it was at Sherlock’s urging all the while.

And while shame and embarrassment flow thick and hot through his veins, he cannot shake off the feel of John’s lips against his own – soft and warm and slightly wet from where he’d been licking them. Sherlock remembers the taste of his breath and the sound of his voice, broken against what he can only classify as desire.

“Hey,” John says more firmly this time, gently pulling Sherlock’s hands from the wall and spinning him around until they’re face to face, despite the fact that Sherlock’s gaze remains resolutely on the floor. “Sherlock, look at me.” John’s hand slides down the other man’s arm, landing loosely on his wrist.

“I remember, John,” he whispers, voice coarse against the lump that’s lodged itself in his throat. “And I’m so very, very sorry.”

“Hey,” John says again in a tone not dissimilar from placating a small child as he squeezes Sherlock’s wrist. “You may be sorry, but… I’m not.”

And Sherlock’s ears must have just malfunctioned. “What?”

“I’m not sorry,” John repeats, fingers slowly moving down his wrist to his palm.

“But you’re… you don’t…”

“I don’t what?” John arches his eyebrow in a playful, yet challenging way.

“Like men,” Sherlock blurs out with little finesse or tact, cheeks immediately flushing as John’s eyes sparkle.

“And how would you know?” he murmurs, grabbing hold of Sherlock’s t-shirt with his free hand and tugging him closer.

And Sherlock simply cannot breathe.

“But…” John sighs, releasing him with a look of exaggerated regret, “we’re in the middle of a hallway in midtown Manhattan, and we’ve walked out of rehearsal for a play which we both care a great deal about. So, I propose we postpone this conversation,” he says, running his fingers through Sherlock’s and threading them together, “and pick it up at a more opportune moment.”

Sherlock swallows hard and nods before he even registers the gesture.

“So,” John whispers, “I need you to stop freaking out because I can literally see the panic in your eyes.”
“I was awful,” comes spilling out of his mouth and John shakes his head.

“You weren’t awful. The complete opposite, in fact.” He gives Sherlock a gentle tug towards the room and, though Sherlock’s feet are sluggish, he goes willingly. “Come on, before Greg comes to collect us.”

And Sherlock really doesn’t want this moment to have more people than those already sharing in it, so he nods and allows John to pull him closer to the door, but when they’re just a few feet from it, John stops and turns to Sherlock once more, placing his hand on his chest.

“Before we do this, know... know that it’s an honor to be one half of this couple with you. And...” he glances up, lancing Sherlock with his gaze, “I don’t think I’ve ever trusted anyone more, in a rehearsal room or out, than I trust you.” He gives a small smile and a nod, turning to go before Sherlock pulls him back and spins him around once more.

“The feeling’s very much mutual, John Watson.” And, before his brain can catch up, he grabs John’s face and leans in, noses brushing as he whispers fiercely, "I'm remembering this one."

“You’re goddamn right you are,” John breathes before closing the distance between them and pressing their lips together.

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‘Giddiness’ would be one word John would use to describe what he’s feeling in this moment, which doesn’t bode well for the murderous guilt he’s supposed to be portraying the minute he steps back into that rehearsal room.

He can feel Sherlock pressed into his back, purposefully bumping into him as he reaches for the handle. “Behave yourself,” John hisses.

“You started it,” Sherlock snaps playfully.

“Did not.”

“Did, too.”

By the time they stumble into the room, they’re laughing so hard, they don’t notice the four identical incredulous pairs of eyes staring at them like they’ve finally gone ‘round the bend.

“All okay?” Greg asks after a moment, attention focused on Sherlock considering he was the one that stormed out five minutes prior.

“All good. We’re ready,” John responds, stressing the ‘we’ as he reaches back and pulls Sherlock gently forward by his arm until they’re side by side.

“Good,” Greg replies, eyes lingering on John with a look that says ‘I’m going to want all of the details later, whether you want to give them up or not.’

John quirks an eyebrow in response accompanied by a smirk and Greg rolls his eyes, gesturing for them to get back to it.

They start at the top, with John’s monologue and he finds the words coming easier, allowing him to focus on the choices and the rhythm all the way through to the end. He steps offstage once more, watching Sherlock in his brilliance embody his husband.
By the time they get back to the moment on the bed, the moment Sherlock pulled away from him, John is John no more – living and breathing the Scottish lord anguishing over his murderous ways. And yet –

He knows the weight of Sherlock in his lap. Feels the press of Sherlock’s lips against his throat. Savors the light smell of aftershave that he sincerely hopes lingers on his clothing.

“Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep’, the innocent sleep, Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care, The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, Chief nourisher in life's feast,--” he inhales harshly, swallowing past the tears that threaten to close his throat as Sherlock pulls away, those azure eyes boring into his own.

“What do you mean?” he asks softly, but with an edge.

“Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house: 'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.” John buries his face in Sherlock’s chest, breathing in a scent that’s already become more comforting than it has any right to be.

“Who was it that thus cried?” Sherlock asks, large hands cupping John’s face and making him feel infinitely small. “Why, worthy thane, You do unbend your noble strength, to think So brainsickly of things. Go get some water, And wash this filthy witness from your hand," he says, holding John’s palm up to the light. “Why did you bring these daggers from the place? They must lie there: go carry them; and smear The sleepy grooms with blood.”

John vehemently shakes his head, before pressing it against Sherlock’s chin. “I'll go no more: I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again I dare not.”

Sherlock slides off John’s lap with a scoff, and John pretends he doesn’t continue reaching for him long after the warmth is gone from his thighs.

“Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed, I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal; For it must seem their guilt.” Sherlock begins to go off, before stopping and placing the quickest of kisses on John’s head before exiting. John has to gather himself simply to recall where he’s supposed to be in the text. But then Sally knocks on the table and it all comes back:

“Whence is that knocking?” He stands and moves toward the imaginary door Sherlock exited through.

How is't with me, when every noise appalls me? What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes. Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand?” He wipes the invisible blood on his trousers so hard, his knuckles turn raw. “No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

Sherlock reenters and John immediately breathes easier – definitely not a character choice. “My hands are of your colour; but I shame
To wear a heart so white.”
Sally knocks again and Sherlock spins, looking for the source.
“I hear a knocking
At the south entry: retire we to our chamber;
A little water clears us of this deed:
How easy is it, then! Your constancy
Hath left you unattended.” He reaches forward and takes John’s hand, attempting to lead him to the washbasin in the corner, but John tugs him back as Sally knocks again.
“Hark! more knocking.
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us,
And show us to be watchers. Be not lost
So poorly in your thoughts.”

“To know my deed, ’twere best not know myself.” John murmurs, acting on instinct as he pulls Sherlock to him and places a desperate kiss on his lips, as yet another knock echoes around the rehearsal hall.
“Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!” he cries, this time allowing Sherlock to place another peck on his lips and pull him offstage.

John slowly feels the character fall away from him as he surreptitiously wipes at the moisture that’s gathered in the corners of his eyes with his left hand. His right is still firmly enclosed within Sherlock’s, who hasn’t yet relinquished his hold on his fingers. And John is more than fine with that.

Distantly, he registers Greg clapping as he makes his way over to them and only then does Sherlock seem to remember where he is and drop John’s hand like a hot poker.

“Masterful,” Greg gushes, clapping each of them on the back with a beaming smile. “Take a breath and then let’s do it all over again!”

John chuckles as he nods, eyes alighting on the tall man beside him who seems to falter under the praise. The tips of his ears are pink, but John truly isn’t sure if that’s from the compliment or the handholding. Greg retreats to confer with Molly about something and John takes the moment to shuffle a tad closer to his leading man.

“Good scene,” he murmurs and Sherlock offers him a tight smile.

“We can do better.”

“Oh I have no doubt,” he replies. “But still…”

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” Sherlock asks suddenly, looking panicked for a moment. “When I climb on you, am I hurting you? I probably should have asked.”

“No! No – I mean,” John clears his throat, “it’s fine. Doesn’t – doesn’t hurt.”

Sherlock nods, relief coming off of him in waves. “Good.”

“John, I know it’s only rehearsal,” Greg calls, “but watch your pacing. I don’t want the words to get muddied up.”
“You got it,” he replies, using his tongue to loosen up his mouth as he stretches his jaw to make the words come easier. Shakespeare is tough, but he’s done Sondheim. He’s pretty sure his diction could handle anything.

“Let’s start and stop this time,” Greg suggests, settling behind his table once more. “If something doesn’t feel right or if I have a correction, we’ll just pause, yeah?”

He receives two thumbs up in reply.

“Back at it?” Sherlock asks and John gives him his cheekiest smile.

“Yes, sir,” he replies with a wink, taking great delight in the way Sherlock’s eyes glaze over. Oh yes, this is going to be quite fun.

They run through the scene a few more times – even backtracking to do some earlier Macbeth/Lady M moments now that Sherlock and John seem to be more comfortable with the physical aspect of the relationship. Not that they’re new to physicality on stage. Sherlock played Giovanni in ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore and John has wooed half of the West End and most of Broadway, both onstage and off. This should be a cakewalk. And yet –

Sherlock can’t help the butterflies (or whatever they are – he refuses to call them butterflies) that bloom in his stomach whenever John claps eyes on him. It’s highly annoying.

He finishes getting his notes from Greg (angrier, less besotted) and curses himself for letting his real feelings interfere with The Work. It seems like he needs to avoid John Watson at all costs if he’s going to do this role any justice. They need to be professional; they need to (he needs to) stop mooning like a lovesick child. Yes. That’s precisely it.

But then he catches John’s eye and Sherlock’s resolve positively crumbles. Oh blast it all to hell.

John’s busy putting his coat on when Clara wanders over to him and Sherlock shuffles closer in an effort to aid his eavesdropping.

“Your sister told me to tell you that she’s expecting you at Marie’s Crisis later.”

“Did she now?” John replies cheekily and Clara blushes, ducking her head.

“She also said, ‘Don’t be a git.’”

Laughter bursts out of John and Sherlock feels lighter at the sound. “Sounds like her,” he says, gaze flicking over to him for a quick second. “What say you, Lady M? You up for a little showtune sing-a-long?”

And Sherlock is convinced his eyebrows could not go any higher. “I beg your pardon?”

“Ooh, are you talking about Marie’s Crisis?” Molly asks with a naughty gleam in her eye. “I’ve heard of that place.”

“I’m bowing out,” Sally laughs, shaking her head. “You sorry sods keep giving me too much paperwork.” That’s her excuse, but Sherlock knows it’s because she can’t carry a tune to save her life. Neither can he, really, and that’s when the fear strikes, stealing the voice from his throat and the
breath from his lungs. But then John is looking at him and smiling in a way that has Sherlock
nodding before he truly even knows what he’s agreeing to.

“Excellent,” John says, clapping his hands together and bending down to swing his bag over his
shoulder.

Greg shakes his head as he helps Molly into her coat (obvious, Gregory) and mutters, “I’m only
going so you two don’t get arsed out of your minds. We have rehearsal in the morning.”

“As if I could forget.” John smiles and Sherlock feels winded as its weight falls on him. “Ready?” he
asks at a decibel much lower than necessary and Sherlock finds himself uttering a phrase he thought
he’d banished from his vocabulary:

“Uh huh.”

Marie’s Crisis turns out to be everything is sounds like: a basement dive bar in the West Village full
of Christmas lights no matter the month, cheap drinks served by a weathered bartender, and a beat up
piano surrounded by the most exuberant, and quite possibly the drunkest, people he’s ever laid eyes
on.

It’s absolutely petrifying.

“Come on,” John shouts over the din, clapping Greg on the back and helping Molly and then Clara
down the narrow steps.

The song is one everyone seems to know and even Sherlock has to admit it sounds vaguely familiar.
He even makes a half-hearted attempt to search his mind palace, before a shriek interrupts his
sleuthing and he turns just in time to see a young woman push her way through the crowd and throw
herself into John’s arms.

Sherlock hates her immediately.

“Johnny! You made it!”

Johnny? Who the hell is Johnny? He gapes silently as the woman pulls away to plant one on John’s
cheek and Sherlock visibly bristles.

“Well I got your message, you maniac,” he manages as he throws an arm around her shoulder and
spins her toward the group. “Clara you already know. Obviously,” he says, tone dripping with
innuendo as the woman smacks the side of his head and John continues on without missing a beat.
Clearly this abuse is an everyday occurrence. “This is my director, Greg, assistant director, Molly,
and –”

“And this must be the famous Sherlock Holmes,” she finishes, smiling brightly and sticking her hand
out. “Oh I’ve heard all about you.”

“Harry,” John mutters as he elbows her in the ribs, and she casts a sidelong glance that’s so distinctly
John, everything all of a sudden clicks into place. Oh.

“You’re Harry,” he states rather dumbly and yet the girl visibly brightens.

“Talking about me, has he been? It’s all lies. Don’t believe a word he says.” She flashes him another
smile, proving that, yes, the Watson charm is definitely genetic, before she turns and gives Greg and
Molly a hearty handshake. “Come on, John! Daniel’s on the piano!”
Sherlock cranes his neck to see an older man pounding away on the keys, black thick-rimmed glasses hiding former matinee idol looks, and completely bald pate reflecting the humidity of the room and the fairy lights on the ceiling.

“John fucking Watson!” the man bellows a moment later, standing up and leaning over the piano to kiss John on the cheek without missing a single bloody note.

John laughs and pulls away muttering, “Okay! Okay,” and only when Sherlock actually takes in the attention John seems to be getting does he realize he’s wandered into a gay piano bar in the flipping West Village that specializes in showtunes. Many of which John has sung to perfection – on Broadway, no less.

He swallows down his whimper and allows Molly to drag him to the bar as John continues to accept accolades from the many fans (some drunk, many not) that have gathered around the piano.

“Two vodka sodas,” Molly chirps, accepting the drinks a moment later from the leathery looking gentleman in the questionable apron behind the bar. “Cheers,” she says, shoving one in Sherlock’s hand and clinking her glass against his. “It’s all rather exciting, isn’t it.”

“That’s one word for it,” Greg chuckles behind them, accepting the beer the bartender is sliding across to him. “These are all on me, as well as whatever those ladies over there are having,” he instructs, pointing to Harry and Clara in the corner.

“Lady,” Sherlock murmurs. “Harry doesn’t drink.” He’s not sure why that, of all things, sticks with him. Maybe it’s because she’s John’s sister and all things John have a habit of clinging to him like laundry fresh out of the dryer.

The man himself eventually makes his way through the crowd, wincing as someone cracks on one of the many high notes of ‘Defying Gravity.’

“I wish they’d retire that song,” he murmurs, stealing Sherlock’s drink and taking a gulp before coughing. “Christ, that’s ¾ vodka.”

Sherlock takes the drink back and tries it, promptly grimacing. “Indeed.”

“So this is what you do in your spare time?” Greg asks and John gives a sheepish shrug.

“It’s what I do when Harry guilts me into coming out. She’ll claim I’m a rubbish big brother if I don’t.”

“And it works every time,” the youngest Watson crows as she and Clara join the circle. “So how are rehearsals going?”

Her gaze lands on John and then Sherlock, but when neither man proves to be particularly loquacious, Greg steps in: “They’re knocking it out of the park,” he grins. “Just you wait.”

And thank god for that because how does he say that it’s the best experience of his professional life and it’s only been two weeks? How does he say that he’s been waiting for someone like John for ages – long before being an actor was a threat he used to worry his brother?

“It’s a privilege,” he blurts out, unsure if they’re even still on the topic, but John is looking at him with that soft look like he’s the most ridiculous and ridiculously endearing human being he’s ever met, and Sherlock can’t be embarrassed when John Watson is gazing at him like that.

But before he can make an even bigger arse out of himself than he already has, he’s saved by a piano
man. Of all things.

“Johnny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...” Daniel sings and the crowd starts catcalling as John rolls his eyes.

“I guess that’s my cue,” he mutters, downing the rest of Sherlock’s drink and signaling to the bartender that he needs another. Apparently everyone is friends with John Watson in this establishment.

“What’ll it be today?” Daniel asks as John draws near, the crowd parting around him as if he were Moses himself.

“What do you suggest?” John asks, peering over the piano to look at the sheet music as Daniel’s eyes flick to Sherlock for a moment so brief, Sherlock thinks he hallucinated it.

But then the piano man says, “Let’s give ‘em a show,” John grins, and Sherlock holds his breath because this might very well be the death of him.

The bar goes remarkably silent and Harry grins like a Cheshire cat as she perches her chin on Clara’s shoulder and wraps her arms around her waist. He can vaguely feel the weight of Greg’s gaze, but he ignores it in favor of watching John tease Daniel about forgetting his cue.

“The day you forget your cue is the day my hair comes back,” the man snarks, playing the haunting opening notes.

Sherlock knows the tune, but only because after he saw A Little Night Music, he went home and downloaded every one of Sondheim’s cast recordings. Both originals and revivals. And he can tell why John is so drawn to his compositions. To his rhythms and his lyrics. To his heartbreak and his hope. It’s beautiful in a way Sherlock never thought musical theatre could be – never allowed musical theatre to be. And this song – this song speaks to him in ways he’s hesitant to admit. ‘Being Alive’ from Company. A man afraid of commitment, who doesn’t see the worth of love and/or marriage, has a change of heart over the course of one song. It’s gorgeous and heartbreaking and John’s about to sing it.

God help him.

“Someone to hold you too close,” he begins quietly.
“Someone to hurt you too deep.
Someone to sit in your chair,
To ruin your sleep.”

Someone in the corner says the intervening dialogue and it’s all Sherlock can do not to march over and clap his hand over their mouths. How dare they speak while John sings, no matter the fact that the spoken lines are just as much a part of the song? His lips part unbidden as he watches John continue, absolutely rapt.

Molly inches over to Sherlock and murmurs, “He’s brilliant,” but Sherlock can only nod in reply because of course John’s brilliant. John Watson would never be anything but. He casually ignores his initial misgivings of the man for he can already feel the bile rise in his throat at the distant and unwanted memory. There’s a shift in the song that makes Sherlock’s non-existent breath catch. Bobby, the character in the musical, realizes that maybe he does want that person in his life and Sherlock swallows hard, cursing the notion of sentiment for making him appear anything resembling emotional.
“Make me alive.
“Make me confused.
Mock me with praise,” John roars and Sherlock, much to his horror, swallows a sob.

“Let me be used.
Vary my days."

“Bloody hell,” Greg breathes as Molly wipes her eyes. The song continues to build, reaching its crescendo, and John is incandescent, pouring every ounce of anger and fear and vulnerability and pride into those final verses. He hits the last note and holds it longer than Sherlock thinks is physically possible, tearing off the final syllable with a passion that gets drowned out by the deafening roar of cheers that erupt around the small bar.

And only then does Sherlock inhale. Only then does he touch his finger to cheek and pull away to find it wet. Only then does he register the terror clawing at his chest, desperate to latch on to anything stable.

Because Sherlock Holmes is pretty sure that he just fell in love with John Watson –

And he fell horrifically hard.

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John’s voice will feel that tomorrow. He hasn’t sung like that without a proper warm up in a long while and he’s not exactly twenty-five anymore.

Still. The look on Sherlock’s face was worth it.

John grins despite himself as he stumbles up the stairs to the door to get some air. The alcohol is warm in his belly and he’s had just enough to make him feel light and giddy and good, but not too much that a few glasses of water won’t make him feel right as rain in the morning. He doesn’t usually drink while rehearsing (or performing, really), but Sherlock seems to be bringing out his more social side. Funny, that, considering Sherlock Holmes is not exactly known for his warm and welcoming demeanor.

He’s come out here for more than air, though, and opening the door and glancing around, he finds his second reason sitting on a neighboring stoop, smoking a cigarette.

“Those things’ll kill you,” he murmurs, nudging Sherlock silently with his shoulder and getting him to budge over.

“Old habits,” Sherlock replies, as John sits, bristling at the cold concrete beneath his trousers. They’re quiet for a moment before Sherlock clears his throat and blows his smoke heavenward.

“What you did in there… that was –”

“Silly, John interrupts.


And John isn’t quite sure what to do with that. His mouth hangs open as he stares at the man next to him. The man who refuses to let his gaze waver anywhere in his direction. John’s always been told he’s good, but as an actor (and a British one at that), he’s never allowed the compliments to go to his head. It’s just not how he works. But praise from Sherlock Holmes, notoriously the most difficult, pompous and arrogant sod that ever walked the boards?
Yeah, John might just hold onto that one for a rainy night.

“Uh, thanks,” he murmurs when he realizes he’s actually been silent this whole time. “That means a lot, you know, coming from you.”

And Sherlock, of all things, scoffs. “One should take my opinion with a grain of salt. I have a reputation of being absolutely horrid.”

“Ah, you’re not all bad,” John replies, nudging him in the shoulder and garnering a smile for his efforts.

They’re tiptoeing around the subject, which John’s many failed relationships can tell him does not bode well. He might as well dive right in, though. Stiff upper lip, keep calm and carry on, and the rest of that shite, he thinks as he inhales deeply.

“So are we going to talk about what happened, or are we just going sit on a stoop and smoke all night?”

Sherlock turns a wry smile on him. “I hardly think I’ll get the almost-doctor to light one up.”

John pinches the bridge of his nose. “Sherlock.”

The man’s playful smirk vanishes, revealing the oft well-hid vulnerability beneath. “What do you want me to say? What do you want to hear? You have a reputation for bedding your leading ladies and I’m a virgin. This will work out well,” he snaps, prickly demeanor firmly in place once more.

“Hey,” John says quietly, reaching over and placing a firm hand on Sherlock’s forearm. “Don’t do that. Don’t end us before we’ve begun.”

“There is no us,” he bites out and John visibly flinches.

“There could be.”

And that’s it. That’s the moment that something inside Sherlock breaks and John witnesses it from the best seat in the house.

“I have The Work, and that’s – that’s it. The Work must come first,” he says, pleads more like, and John nods, turning to face him more fully.

“I agree. The work comes first. This play is the priority. But that doesn’t mean…” he swallows and licks his lips, taking comfort in the fact that Sherlock’s gaze drops to his mouth. “You need to know that I don’t go into those relationships wishing or expecting them to fail. They just…”

“Do,” Sherlock supplies and John nods.

“That being said, I respect you too much to enter into this lightly. The work comes first and I agree. So we can just put whatever this is,” he says, breath hitching as his chest aches, “to the side and see where everything falls come opening. Or – or later.”

Sherlock cocks his head, studying him and John feels remarkably like he’s sitting beneath a microscope.

“After opening, then,” Sherlock eventually agrees and John manages a smile, even as his stomach turns. Sherlock continues to stare at him and it’s infuriating because if this is going to work, if they’re going to keep it a secret, then that madman cannot keep looking at him like that.
And before John can open his mouth and tell him so, Sherlock is leaning in and pressing their lips together in a kiss so sweet and chaste, John nearly whimpers with the unfairness of it all, threading his fingers through Sherlock’s hair just to hold him there for a beat longer.

“Forgive me,” Sherlock mutters when he pulls away. “I just needed to do that once more.”

“Trust me, no forgiveness necessary.” His voice is gruff, and he leaves his hand at the back of Sherlock’s neck feeling his body rise and fall with every breath he takes.

“We’ve got to meet the press next week,” Sherlock eventually points out and John’s stomach drops. The press love him, but he can’t exactly say the feeling’s mutual. He’s witnessed many a friend get torn apart by the critics, gossip columnists, and casual bloggers to put much faith in the lot.

“We do,” he agrees after a moment. “Think we can pull this off?”

Sherlock is silent before the quiet admission comes: “I don’t know.”

“And you hate not knowing,” John whispers a little numbly, savoring one last glance at the man to his right before staring at the quiet street, its inhabitants unaware of the earthshaking realization John Watson has just come to.

He’s horribly in love with Sherlock Holmes.

And he just agreed to let him go.

Chapter End Notes

- Marie's Crisis is real and it is glorious.
- 'Defying Gravity' is from Wicked by Stephen Schwartz.
- Company is written by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth. If you want a good recording of 'Being Alive,' listen to Raul Esparza from the 2006 revival. Holy shit.
Chapter Summary

“...right now – what’s going on with you and John. Is it serious and will it get out to the press?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” he sniffs, chin tilted toward the ceiling.

“Bullshit,” Irene replies. “You two go hot and cold faster than my building’s faulty water heater.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.”
- Sonnet 18

Press days make Molly more anxious than she already is on a regular basis and that’s saying something. The rehearsal room is a flurry of activity as company management sets up refreshments, the marketing team rolls out the step-and-repeat, and the various cameramen set up their equipment. Meanwhile, she’s cowering in the corner doing her best impression of a wall as she sips her coffee and impatiently waits for Greg to arrive.

Thankfully, he strides in a moment later, looking remarkably good in dark jeans and a grey blazer, hair parted and combed for the occasion. Even Molly made an effort, putting on a sundress and cardigan instead of her usual jeans and shirt. Rehearsing a bloody play with a room full of boys isn’t exactly conducive to one’s beauty regimen.

Catching her eye, Greg beams and walks over, offering a polite nod to the reporters gathering near the table of mini-muffins.

"They've released the hounds," he murmurs, placing a kiss on her cheek. "No turning back now."

"Don't say that too loudly, I'm sure they've bugged the place," she fires back and he laughs.

"Bite your tongue. It's one of my biggest fears." They turn to survey the room once more, each taking matching massive inhales.

It's odd, press day. Letting 'outsiders' into your rehearsal room, your sacred space. Molly's become very territorial over it and protective of the men in her charge, Greg included. She nudges him gently, before handing over her coffee and letting him take a gulp.

"Bless you," he says, grimacing as the hot liquid burns his tongue.

"They'll be able to handle this, right?" Molly asks after a quiet moment and Greg smiles softly.

"The cast? They'll be fine."
"I'm not talking about the whole cast," she replies.

Greg lowers his chin to his chest. "I know you're not."

Molly worries her lower lip between her teeth and wordlessly takes the coffee Greg is handing back to her. Sherlock and John have been off recently and she just can't understand. Their relationship has more ups and downs than a mountain range. The first week, Sherlock was a right mess, ignoring John and snapping because he just didn't know how to handle having an equal in the room. The second week, they were thick as thieves (and perhaps more so), but now? Now they can't even look at each other and Molly truly wonders if they broke Greg's cardinal rule:

No shagging before opening.

But though that might be John's modus operandi, it's certainly not Sherlock's.

"They're professionals," Greg says, calming Molly's unspoken worries. "They'll be fine."

Molly nods, but she isn't so sure. A pair of the finest actors in the world and their toughest role might just be being themselves.

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Her lipstick is red, her eyeliner is flawless, and her dress clings to every contour. After over a decade in the business, Irene knows how to prep for a press day.

Which is why the room goes noticeably quiet when she strides through the door and she smirks a bit to herself, before catching sight of Molly and Greg in the corner.

“And how are we doing on this fine Tuesday morning?” she asks and Greg groans.

“Bloody eager to get this over and done with.”

“Oh, they don’t bite,” she teases and Molly mutters, “Much.”

The room is rapidly filling up with people milling around, hands glued to their smartphones as they reply to emails and check the headlines of the day. Irene spots someone reading The Times in the corner and fails to repress a roll of her eyes.

“Did you read the review for Streetcar?”

Greg gives a low whistle and nods. “How much did Jim Moriarty pay Brantley for that one?”

“Not his soul, I can tell you,” she drawls. “He bartered that one away a long while ago.”

James Moriarty opened a revival of A Streetcar Named Desire last night and, much to Irene’s displeasure, the reviews this morning were mostly glowing. Bastard.

She hides her sneer as best as she can and ignores the thought that Moriarty’s theatre will only be a block away from their own. A Manhattan city block is far too short a distance between Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty. Irene would prefer it if Moriarty had gone on tour in Japan.

She clears her throat and plasters a smile on her face as Mike sidles up to them, offering Greg a hearty handshake and introducing himself to Molly.

She likes John Watson’s agent. He’s warm and welcoming, not unlike John himself. It’s a refreshing change of pace in this business.
“Ms. Adler,” he nods.

“Mr. Stamford,” she replies, smiling in a mostly genuine way – an odd feeling if there ever was one. “How’s your client today?”

“Feeling good, I think. Spoke to him this morning and he was upbeat.”

“Lucky you. Mine’s in a right state.”

“Yours is always in a right state,” Greg mutters and Irene smirks.

“Less so more recently, though. Wouldn’t you agree?” she asks, tone laden with implication. They all know, Mike included, that Sherlock’s been more well behaved on this production than on any other. And they all know who deserves the credit for that.

“It was nice while it lasted anyway,” Greg murmurs, nodding to the man himself as he strides into the room, head held high with a disdainful look gracing his face. And the reporters track his progress as one, like a pride of lions accessing their prey.

“It seems like a lovely day to piss off the general members of the press,” he greets as he draws near. “And I use that term loosely.”

“Ah, Sherlock, always in fine form,” Greg drawls, grabbing his elbow and steering him towards the corner, throwing a look over his shoulder to ensure Irene is following him.

And oh is she ever. She won’t let Greg have an intervention without her. She does so love those.

“Unhand me. This is bespoke,” Sherlock complains and Greg all but ignores him. It’s one of his more endearing qualities.

“I need to know – right now – what’s going on with you and John. Is it serious and will it get out to the press?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” he sniffs, chin tilted toward the ceiling.

“Bullshit,” Irene replies. “You two go hot and cold faster than my building’s faulty water heater.”

“We’re fine,” Sherlock says after a moment, but it’s so soft, so unconvincing, that Irene’s icy exterior melts just a bit. His focus wavers for a moment, to something just over Greg’s shoulder, and Irene turns in time to see John enter and catch Mike’s eye, making a beeline for him and giving the press a winning smile as he passes.

“He at least knows how to fake it,” she murmurs, bringing Sherlock’s sharp focus back on her once more.

“I’m an actor with an Olivier and a BAFTA in his hall closet – ”

“Who happens to be in love with his costar.”

And Irene knows she’s hit the nail on the head when all of the color, even the light pink of his lips, drains from his face.

When he doesn’t refute it, Greg drops his chin to his chest with a muttered, “Bloody hell,” and Irene steps forward, hands held up in placation as panic begins to set into Sherlock’s features.

“Hey, hey,” she soothes, grabbing hold of his forearms as his hands perch on his hips. “It’s okay.”
“It is not okay,” he bites out. “The Work comes first.”

“Christ, Sherlock,” Greg breathes. “Not if it makes you miserable.”

A part of Irene that she’s kept long buried breaks at the lost look in Sherlock’s eyes. At the way his fingers dig into his sides, as if to keep from reaching out. At the way he’s utterly failing to keep his attention away from John.

But then the agent part of her kicks in: the cold, calculating press rep that realizes they cannot have this conversation feet away from a legion of reporters with a working internet connection.

“Look, we can get into this another time, but right now – ”

“Right now,” Sherlock interrupts, “I’m going to stand in front of those cameras and talk about how fulfilling this experience has been, how wonderful it is to be back working with Greg, and how John Watson ups my game like no actor that’s come before him. Satisfied?”

Irene and Greg can only gape as Sherlock pushes past them, stalking into the hall, but not before throwing a smile to the gaggle of reporters right out of the John Watson School of Charming Bullshit.

“He really keeps his awards in his hall closet?” Greg blurts out after a moment and Irene groans.

“Really, Greg, now is not the time.”

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John watches Sherlock exit the room in what he hopes is a surreptitious manner, but when Mike calls his name for what is clearly not the first time, he knows he’s been found out.

“You’ve got it bad,” his agent murmurs and John visibly fidgets.

“Not now,” he says lowly with a nod towards the press, and Mike fixes him with a look that clearly says ‘No shit.’

When John had entered, he immediately clocked Sherlock’s position in the corner of the rehearsal hall, flanked by Irene and Greg, looking a bit like a wild animal who’d been caught. He didn’t want to know their topic of conversation, but he’s a smart man. He could guess. And if going by the way Sherlock’s eyes kept finding him across the room, John was right in his assumptions.

Still, as much as he’d like to go after the man who looked a moment away from perfectly demonstrating the art of defenestration, it’s in his best interest (and the show’s) that he stay exactly where he is.

“John,” Mike sighs, like the put upon man he is. “At least pretend you’re paying attention.”

“What? I am!”

“Then what did I just say?”

John racks his brain, trying to find something that Mike’s been harping on about for weeks, and then it finally hits him: “Broadway.com wants me to do another blog.”

Mike’s eyebrows shoot up, like he truly wasn’t expecting that, before his eyes narrow and he shakes a finger in John’s direction. “Oh, you’re good, you sneaky son of a bitch.”
And John guffaws, knowing he was only able to pull that out of the hat because he knows his agent too damn well.

“I’ll think about it.”

“It was their most popular piece,” Mike coaxes and John verbally bats him down with a “Yeah, yeah.”

Before he knows it, though, he’s being ushered forward by the show’s press reps and placed carefully in front of a camera, squinting into the light as Irene (where did she come from?) reaches forward and fixes his tie with a wink.

“How are you, John?” the bearded young man with the microphone asks and John smiles as he recognizes the familiar face from many a red carpet.

“David, good to see you again,” he replies and David’s face lights up. He doubts many actors that cross the young man’s path bother learning his name let alone remembering it.

He receives the usual questions: how he’s feeling, what are the challenges, why the move from musicals to Shakespeare, and yet David always manages one out of left field (“Bed, Wed, or Behead: Macbeth Edition”), and that’s perhaps why John deems him worth remembering.

He bids David goodbye and begins to make his way down the line with a polite smile and a decent amount of enthusiasm. Sean’s ahead of him and Sherlock’s behind, and the fact that he manages to keep an ear on Sherlock’s interviews is impressive in and of itself. Mike’s glaring at him from behind the press line like he knows exactly what John is doing and John offers him a cheeky smile in return as he focuses on the reporter in front of him once more.

Sherlock’s interviews seem to last shorter than his own, which he supposes is not all that surprising. Sherlock is a man of few words when he wants to be which is pretty much always (unless he’s showing off), and John reaches the end of the press line as Sherlock lines up for his last interview.

Mike joins him once more, but John is too busy attempting to study Sherlock the way Sherlock studies the world: with a careful eye and an x-ray vision that John constantly feels is stripping him piece by piece until his very soul is laid bare for all the world to see. Or perhaps not the world. Just one person in it.

“Your old castmate, James Moriarty, will be just a block away from the St. James. Are you looking forward to bumping into him?” the reporter from The Post asks and John wonders what the hell kind of question that is, taking delight in pondering its potential answers – but then he actually takes a look at Sherlock. The man John had labeled unflappable is looking nothing short of a deer caught in the headlights, blinking owlishly as his fists clench in his pockets.

“Um,” he begins and John straightens, because he’s pretty sure Sherlock’s never said “um” in his life. They’ve done a good hour of interviews – answering the same questions in slightly different ways – perhaps Sherlock has used up his store of lies? He must have, because his uncanny ability to fake it is positively failing him at the moment. And before he can second guess himself, John knows exactly what he has to do.

“He’ll be too busy sparring with my sorry arse,” he laughs, sliding effortlessly into frame and throwing an arm across Sherlock’s stiff shoulders. The reporter looks delighted at this turn of events, while Irene and Mike look like they’re watching a train wreck in slow motion.

“Yes,” Sherlock clears his throat, “Yes, sparring with John has become a welcome change of pace.”
John squeezes his shoulder before dropping his arm, yet he remains close enough that they knock into one another.

“And, John? What are looking forward to most?” the reporter asks and John smiles.

“Getting a master class from this one every night,” he replies without missing a beat, gently nudging Sherlock before tugging him off-camera.

“Thank you,” Irene mouths as she takes Sherlock’s elbow and leads him towards the corner of the room where the rest of the cast is waiting for the group photo. John exhales breath he didn’t realize he was holding as Greg sidles up to him.

“Nice save.”

“Was it too obvious?” Crap, what if he just did more harm than good?

“Not to anyone who wasn’t looking for it,” Greg replies and places a hand on John’s shoulder. “I hope you two know what you’re doing.”

“Haven’t the faintest,” is his quiet answer, a now-familiar pang hitting somewhere in the vicinity of his solar plexus.

He feels the weight of Sherlock’s gaze on him and he knows he shouldn’t meet it, but he does anyway, freezing as the tall genius gives him a grateful look and a small nod.

John returns it and realizes, not for the first time, that he’d save Sherlock Holmes as many times as the stupid git would let him.

xxxxxx

Sherlock doesn’t realize how much tension he’s holding until the last of the reporters leave and his shoulders visibly slump.

“See? We survived.” John smiles, but his eyes don’t spark the way they usually do and Sherlock realizes that self-preservation is an overrated, horrible, and hateful thing.

The rest of the cast is slowly filtering out of the room to continue rehearsing with Molly in another studio while Greg oversees the photos for the marketing campaign – an event which Sherlock had deleted up until about thirty seconds ago when Sarah Sawyer walked through the door with a rack full of very dark and very leather costumes.

God save him.

“Hello, lovelies,” Sarah greets, planting a kiss on John’s cheek as Sherlock grudgingly accepts one directly following. "Are we ready to play dress-up?"

“That depends on your definition of 'ready,” Sherlock snaps and Sarah smiles, pinching his cheek.

“Yes, I’ve missed you, too.”

John snorts and takes the trousers and shirt Sarah is holding out for him, throwing an amused look in Sherlock’s direction as he disappears to the bathroom to change. A moment later, he’s tossed his own garments: a pair of black leather trousers and a deep aubergine shirt, and he takes a moment to rub the soft, silken material in between his fingertips. He had seen the sketches at first rehearsal when Sarah did her design presentation, but he’s not sure anything could have prepared him for the
moment John Watson walks back into the room dressed as Macbeth.

The leather trousers look divine and the navy blue of his own shirt brings out the cool depths of his eyes. Eyes which find him across the room and shyly duck away as his cheeks flush.

“Christ Almighty,” Irene breathes and Sherlock rolls his eyes.

“Down girl.” Yet his retort would have been so much more effective had his voice not cracked. And Irene knows it.

He flees to the relative safety of the bathroom and locks the door behind him, leaning against it and breathing heavily as he wills his heart rate to return to its normal tempo.

He supposes there’s nothing for it, though, eyeing the clothes in his tight grip. With a sigh and a muttered, “What the hell,” he changes quickly and spares a glance for the mirror as he reaches for the door once more.

Oh.

He doesn’t look half bad, actually. He turns fully and smoothes a hand down his front, admiring the way the material clings to his relatively defined chest. Yes, this might work out quite nicely.

Confidence restored, he swings the door open and strides back into the rehearsal hall, taking great delight in the way conversation seems to halt when he enters.

Irene is looking like the cat that got the canary, Greg is frowning and cocking his head, already trying to figure out how to frame the shot, and John – John is staring at him slack-jawed like he’s the spoon and Sherlock is the dish of ice cream.

Yes, he owes Sarah a gift basket. A big one.

“You sure know how to fill out a shirt,” the costume designer murmurs, giving him a bright smile as she attacks him with a lint roller. And for once, he holds still and allows himself to be manhandled, if only because Sarah’s inadvertently putting him on display for the room at large and Sherlock is very much okay with that if it means John Watson’s gaze remains on him for the foreseeable future.

“There we go,” she concludes, spinning him once more for good measure. “Greg, shirt tucked or untucked?”

Greg tilts his head and glances between both men for a moment. “Untucked, I think. Messier that way.”

Sarah hums an agreement and brings Sherlock closer to the dark backdrop the photographer has erected in the center of the room, surrounded by camera equipment.

She reaches for John next, gripping him by the shoulders and tousling his hair a bit before she turns him for Greg’s approval.

“It’s a good look,” the director grins and John glares.

“Ta.”

Greg continues to grin cheekily, taking far too much delight in watching his leading men get trotted around like show dogs, and Sherlock inhales sharply when he’s finally pressed next to John for final inspection.
“All right, how were you thinking?” he asks the photographer who glances at the two wooden benches that have been set up, one slightly higher than the other, like a set of bleachers.

“I think, John, you come down here,” the photographer begins, guiding John into position on the lower bench, “And, Sherlock, you come just behind him and off to the side a bit.”

Something about it doesn’t feel right, but he must be truly out of his element if he complies without so much as a complaint. His right knee brushes John’s left shoulder and he feels the heat of his skin even through two layers of relatively thick clothing.

“Great. Now, John, you look down and, Sherlock, you look at the camera,” the photographer (whose name he’s already deleted) instructs and he takes a few shots as Irene grins like a Cheshire cat, snapping her own photos with her phone on the other side of the room.

She takes far too much delight in his discomfort.

“IT’S not sexy enough,” Greg murmurs after a moment and Sherlock pales considerably. Even John sits up a bit straighter at that declaration.

Well, what on earth could the man have in mind, he wonders, before quickly deciding he’d rather not know.

“Here,” Greg begins, stepping forward and surveying the scene the way Sherlock studies the text. “Sherlock, you move directly behind John.”

Sherlock does so, knees gently knocking into John’s back as he settles into his position and tries to retain his composure. John’s aftershave invades his senses and he’s so close, he can see the subtle color changes in John’s flaxen hair.

Pay attention, his mind barks as he comes back into the room.

“John, scoot back a bit and rest your left elbow on his knee.”

And Christ almighty, John does just that, leaning his weight against the inside of Sherlock’s thighs. He has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from making a rather embarrassing sound.

“All right?” John murmurs, as if sensing Sherlock’s distress and Sherlock nods, before realizing that John can’t actually see him.

“Yes,” he whispers and John squeezes his knee.

Warmth explodes in Sherlock’s chest.

“Here, John, take this,” Greg says as he hands him a sword. “Hold it in your right hand, point on the ground.”

“Like this?” John asks and Greg nods.

“Now, Sherlock, lean into John’s left ear. You’re Lady Macbeth telling him to murder your king, yeah?”

Oh now they’re getting into familiar territory. As Sherlock Holmes, this is absolutely petrifying, but as Lady Macbeth, he’s at liberty to be as salacious as he chooses with his husband. His right hand rests on John’s shoulder, thumb brushing the exposed skin at his collar. He inhales deeply as he moves in, breathing in coffee and comfort and John as he practically nuzzles the other man’s ear with
his nose.

“John, look at the camera.”

And Sherlock, just because he can and because he might never get another shot at this, slides his right hand down John’s arm and places it on top of John’s on the grip of the sword as his left tucks under John’s arm and splays wide across his stomach in a possessive move that leaves no room for questions.

John’s breath hitches and Sherlock feels it rumble against his fingers. He presses harder and squeezes John’s hand on top of the sword, as if to let him know that they’re in this together.

And John must understand because his breathing settles and his spine clicks into place, building the kind of silhouette that only kings and incredible actors possess. Sherlock presses his nose against John’s ear as the other man’s fingers tighten on his knee.

“And there it is,” he hears Greg murmur with something akin to reverence. “That’s the poster.”

They hold for a bit longer and the only sound in the room is the constant shutter of the camera, capturing a moment that will be burned into Sherlock’s brain for all the rest of his days.

And just as quickly as the magic comes, it goes. The room fills back up with people, the lights burn bright once more, and the air of Lady M falls away, leaving Sherlock with only himself.

He clears his throat as he pulls away from John’s ear and lets his hand drop from the sword, feeling the loss of warmth as distinctly as if he had just shed a winter coat.

“Hey,” John whispers as Sherlock gets up to leave, stopping him with a hand on his arm. “That was good.”

And how can such an inadequate word sound like Bach to his ears? Good? That was fantastic. Brilliant. Unparalleled. But ‘good’ coming from John Watson sounds like that which has no equal.

“Yes, quite good,” he manages, ducking his head if only to avoid the too blue eyes that match that too blue shirt.

But ‘good’ is actually a perfect descriptor for John Watson. Like the man himself, it’s plain, unassuming, ordinary. Until one is used to describe the other.

Good John Watson.

Then ‘good’ becomes ‘great’ and John becomes extraordinary.

xxxxxx

Irene retreats to her midtown office, which Sherlock refers to as her ‘lair,’ for the remainder of the day while the boys continue rehearsing.

She’s got an inbox full of scripts, interview requests, and increasingly threatening notes from Mycroft Holmes, but all she can think about are the two idiots now in her charge. Because, as it’s become perfectly clear, Sherlock Holmes now comes as a packaged deal. And taking John Watson under her wing might be the best thing for all parties involved. She’s not sure what cockamamie plan they’ve concocted, but it’s clearly all going to shit. Admitting and acting on their feelings might hurt the show, but denying those feelings will do just as much damage, if not more so. Deeming the former the lesser of two evils, she slogs through a bit of work before doing some online shopping at
Bloomingdales, because that photoshoot alone deserves an early exit and a gin martini.

Which is why she takes great delight in dropping over $300 on a pair of designer shoes, packing up her things, and hitting her favorite haunt while the rest of the city still slaves away.

Her phone pings with a Google alert before she even leaves the building, though, and she stops to bring the article up, promptly letting loose a string of expletives that has even the security guard blushing.

**Pack a Parka**

*Bundle up if you’re heading to the St. James this spring. Things are feeling decidedly chilly.*

*By Michael Riedel*

This morning, the cast of the Broadway revival of *Macbeth* met the press inside the usually cozy New 42nd St. Studios, but temperatures were feeling downright wintery between its leading men. Despite the jovial atmosphere, John Watson and Sherlock Holmes barely glanced at one another as they conducted their separate interviews and, for a pair who are meant to be playing married, it seems like couples counseling is in their future.

Stay tuned: this showbiz marriage might be over before it’s begun.

“Son of a bitch.”

She dials Mike’s number with the speed of a gunslinger in a western and pops the Bluetooth piece into her ear, waiting impatiently for the other man to pick up.

“I’m reading it now,” he greets as she stalks past the traumatized security guard and out into the early evening light.

“We need to do some damage control.”

“Christ,” Mike mutters as he presumably gets to the end of the article.

“Precisely,” she replies as she raises her arm for a cab.

“I didn’t think they were that bad.”

“John saved it towards the end, but he’s not wrong. It’s been brisk in that room since the beginning of last week. Hang on – ” she instructs as her phone pings again.

“I think I just got the same. It’s a rough edit of the marketing photo. Already?” Mike asks and she snorts.

“It’s amazing what Photoshop can do these days.” She quickly scrolls through her inbox, finds the email, and taps the attachment.

“Blimey,” Mike breathes just as the image loads on Irene’s phone.

And holy hell, what an image it is.

“Mike,” she says after a moment, “that’s not a photo of two people indifferent towards one another.”

“No, it bloody well isn’t.”

Irene smiles as she stares at it. At John seemingly dismantling the camera with merely a glance. At
Sherlock, arms curled possessively around the man who’d do absolutely anything for him. It’s hot, it’s dangerous, it’ll sell tickets, but most of all - it's genuine.

“Release that and then see what the internet hounds have to say. I don’t think ‘chilly’ will be the word on people’s minds. Feeling up for a counterstrike?”

“Oh you are a wicked woman,” Mike chuckles.

“Well, you know what they say: ‘Something wicked this way comes.’

Artwork by @bluebellofbakerstreet
Artwork by @Khorazir
Chapter End Notes

- LOOK AT ALL OF THE DRAWING TALENT. LOOK AT IT. THANK YOU TO ALL.
- A "step-and-repeat" is the background of publicity photos that has the name of the show/movie and maybe the sponsor on it.
- 'Brantley' is Ben Brantley, the head theatre critic for The New York Times
- Michael Riedel is the theatre gossip columnit for The New York Post
“Why does Sherlock hate Jim Moriarty so much?” he asks suddenly, the question popping into his mind unbidden.

Irene arches an eyebrow. “Does he need a reason?”

John nods a concession. “Well, there’s the usual hatred, and then there’s Sherlock’s. It’s… it’s on a whole other level.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter just kept getting longer and longer. I'm so sorry.

“O time, thou must untangle this, not I. It is too hard a knot for me t’untie.”

- Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene II

John has had two serious relationships and god knows how many casual ones, but not a single one has left him as confused and adrift as whatever the hell is going on with Sherlock Holmes.

That photo shoot was the highlight of his bloody year and yet when they returned to rehearsal just that afternoon, Sherlock was once more closed off and aloof. Sure, they shared their scenes and Greg was spouting out words like “brilliant” and “fantastic,” but when the façade slipped away, when they were no longer Macbeth and Lady M, John felt bereft. It was a feeling he was unaccustomed to and not one he cared to share for much longer.

The lift dings as he reaches the ground floor and he nods a goodbye to Sean and Andrew as he wraps his scarf around his neck, preparing for that first bite of winter wind. March in New York is marked by only two things: horrible weather and a general hatred for St. Patrick’s Day. Also known as that day when John passed no fewer than twelve completely plastered youngers on his way to rehearsal. At 9:30 in the morning. Do they teach kids nothing these days? It’s a marathon, not a sprint, he thinks, as he pushes the door open and winces against the blast of cold air.

“John, have a drink with me,” comes from his right and he yelps out an expletive as he jumps, turning to find Irene leaning against the wall.

“You’ve got to stop doing that.”

“What, and miss all the joy of watching you skitter away like a high strung cat? Never.” She grins and steps forward, looping her arm in his. “So about that drink.”

He chuckles and hoists his bag over his shoulder, giving a careful nod after a moment. “You’re up to
something, but I’ll play along.”

“Good boy,” she replies as she tugs him closer.

“Where are we going?” Sherlock asks as he pushes through the door a moment later and John watches as Irene fixes him with a look that wouldn’t have been out of place on his mother when he’d done something particularly naughty.

“I don’t recall inviting you.”

Sherlock’s mouth pops open and even John finds his eyebrows skyrocketing as he glances cautiously between the agent and the client.

“You’re serious,” Sherlock states and Irene grins in a way that can only be described as feral.

“Deadly.”

The man huffs like a petulant child and begins to stalk down the block, chin lifted as his holier-than-thou expression turns into the breeze.

“What is it with you two?” John asks after Sherlock turns the corner and Irene shrugs, cold demeanor melting.

“I just like riling him up. It’s one of the few pleasures of my job.”

“Nutters, the both of you,” John chuckles, allowing Irene to steer him towards 8th Avenue.

It’s a slow stroll, so different from the constant power-walking he does through the city to get past the tourists who insist on meandering five abreast. New York sidewalks weren’t built for that. But still, this is… nice. He holds the arm that Irene continues to grip firmly, his inner gentleman insisting that chivalrous protocol be upheld.

She eventually guides him to 46th St. and, for a brief moment, he thinks they’re heading to Joe Allen, before she makes a sharp left turn and tugs him up the stairs to the hidden bar everyone in theatre knows resides above the restaurant: Bar Centrale – the worst kept secret on Broadway.

“Miss Adler,” the hostess greets as she nods to a table tucked against the wall.

“Thank you, darling,” Irene responds and John follows her as she gestures to the seat facing the room. “Your preference, I presume.”

John pulls out her chair as she lithely slides into it. “And how do you know I like to face the room?”

“You’re a soldier – you’d never put your back to the door.”

And he freezes halfway to his own seat, blood rushing in his ears. “How did you…?” he trails off, face draining because Sherlock had promised. He promised he wouldn’t tell a soul.

“Oh sweetheart, nothing like that,” she assures, placing her hand on his arm and pulling him the rest of the way into his seat. “But Sherlock isn’t the only one who deduces.”

Oh. Is he really so transparent?

“I see.”

“John, I’m pretty sure the amount of things I know could take down multiple governments, not to
mention a few monarchies. Your secret’s safe with me.”

And he can’t help but crack a smile. “Oh I have no doubt,” he replies when he’s found his voice and is thankfully prevented from saying much more when a waiter arrives to take their drink order.

“Grey Goose martini, please. Dirty.” Irene leans forward and places a perfectly manicured hand on the admittedly attractive waiter’s arm. “And if you could rustle up a couple of extra olives, I’d forever be in your debt.”

“You got it,” the young man replies, flashing Irene a winning smile that he’s no doubt perfected in the mirror. “And for you, sir?”

“Uh, scotch on the rocks, please,” John replies.

“Any particular type of scotch?”

And before John can reply, Irene is rattling off, “Oban, obviously.” The waiter nods and swiftly disappears, as Irene fixes John with the same calculating glance he sees on Sherlock’s face day after day. “You’re not used to the finer things.”

He quirks a smile. “I didn’t always have the finer things.”

She leans forward and rests her elbows on the table, offering him a lovely look down her blouse, which he definitely doesn’t take. “You’re good for him, you know.”

“Am I, now.” Ah yes. This is why he’s been invited on this little adventure. Dating advice.

“He’s not as tough as he’d like everyone to think, John,” she continues, suddenly serious. “He’s actually quite fragile.”

“I know,” he replies quietly.

“You’d like the world to think you’re calm, cool, and collected professionals, but what you’re actually doing is pointing a huge, blinking neon sign at yourselves that says, ‘Look how besotted we actually are.’”

He sighs and wishes his scotch would hurry up and get here so he can down it in one go. “Are you here to tell me to stay away? Afraid I’ll ruin his chances of finally getting that Tony Award?”

“No, I’m here to tell you to get your head out of your arse and snog him senseless,” she snaps, leaning back once more and taking great delight in the fact that John can’t answer right away because the waiter has returned with their beverages.

John takes a long sip and has to admit that the Oban is going down incredibly smoothly.

“Unless you’ve already snogged him senseless,” she continues once the waiter leaves, as if the conversation never paused.

“Why ask questions to which you already know the answer,” he retorts, remembering that ill-fated morning when he woke with a headache and a crick in his neck from sleeping on Sherlock’s couch.

“Why are men such idiots?” Irene asks after a moment and John chuckles.

“I couldn’t tell you.” He pops a handful of bar nuts into his mouth and watches Irene survey the room. She’s like a panther, all grace and subtlety right up until the moment she pounces. “Why does Sherlock hate Jim Moriarty so much?” he asks suddenly, the question popping into his mind
unbidden.

Irene arches an eyebrow. “Does he need a reason?”

John nods a concession. “Well, there’s the usual hatred, and then there’s Sherlock’s. It’s… it’s on a whole other level.”

“It is, isn’t it,” Irene smiles and leans back, bringing her martini with her and giving a slight shrug. “Moriarty’s a media darling and Sherlock is most definitely not.”

“No,” John shakes his head. “It’s deeper than that.”

Irene levels a glance at him, as if weighing him on the scales of justice. She must deem him worthy, though, because after a careful moment, she says, “There was an expose. And I use that term loosely because 98% of it was complete and total bollocks.”

“And Sherlock was mentioned?”

“Sherlock was the crux of it. They dated a while back,” Irene replies carefully and John has no explanation for the absolute rage that explodes in the pit of his gut. “Dated’ is another word I use incredibly loosely,” she continues, completely ignorant of the all-out war John’s emotions are having. “They went out a few times. Moriarty tried to take it further, but Sherlock just… couldn’t do that. It was the start of an obsession on Moriarty’s part and because he couldn’t have Sherlock, he decided to pick him apart.”

John swallows hard and stirs his drink. “What did he say?”

“He stoked the fire on multiple rumors: that Sherlock was a nightmare to work with, which to be perfectly honest, wasn’t that far off the mark. But there were lurid details about sexual exploits that never happened, brawls that never occurred, statements that were never said. By the end of it, you could’ve asked anyone in the business and they would have told you that Sherlock Holmes was an alcoholic, promiscuous, haughty hack who was only in theatre because his family’s money put him there. It cost him more jobs than I care to count.” Her expression turns hard as she stares at her olives. “And put him on the path toward darker things.”

“Jesus,” John breathes.

“It’s a time we don’t really like to talk about,” Irene says in conclusion, gaze meeting his once more. “But you deserved to know.”

He nods and takes another sip, if only to quell the sudden nausea in his stomach. His grip on the glass tightens and he imagines that it’s Moriarty’s neck. He’s never had the displeasure of working with the man, and now he never will. Not when the sight of him alone could potentially get him charged with murder in the first degree.

“To be perfectly honest, I’m surprised this is news to you,” Irene says after a moment. “You’ve been around the business long enough.”

“I tend not to read shite like that,” John bites back and Irene’s face turns soft, a welcome and beautiful change from the hard, calculating lines that have made her so good at what she does.

“Oh, John, you never cease to amaze me.”

He huffs out a laugh, feeling suddenly exhausted. “Does that mean I passed some kind of test?”
“Oh honey, you passed that test on day one,” she replies, signaling the waiter for another round before John’s even halfway through his own.

And he giggles, because life certainly hasn’t been dull since this crazy pair started brightening his days, but the amusement is quick to die on his lips as one word echoes around the bar in a soft, all too familiar lilt.

“John?”

He glances at the woman slowing to stop at their table and feels his insides contort into all manner of unpleasant positions.

“Mary.”

xxxxxx

Irene’s hackles are up before she’s even aware of what’s happening – all she knows is that John’s adorable features have gone slack and whatever he’s staring at is not bringing him any kind of joy.

And then she gets a whiff of perfume and Mary Morstan enters her line of sight. Tremendous.

Thankfully, the tables are too close together and John’s too pressed against the wall for him to stand and greet her the way she might want him to. But just to be sure, Irene crosses her legs, effectively placing her knees in between the former lovers.

Mary Morstan: thirty-four-years-old, has one Tony nomination, and has been regretting breaking it off with the man across from her ever since she kicked him out the door five months ago.

No, Irene doesn't like her one bit.

"How've you been?" Mary asks, thoroughly ignoring Irene who's more than content to sip her martini and pretend to not exist, but then instead of answering, John clears his throat and gestures across the table.

"This is my friend, Irene."

And Irene isn't given to sentimental expressions, but something warms in her at his words. Yes, she thinks she might just be quite proud to be John Watson's friend.

"Irene Adler," she offers, holding out her hand, which Mary takes, looking like she's swallowed something a bit sour.

"Pleasure. Oh Adler. Aren't you Sherlock Holmes' agent?"

Irene raises an eyebrow and plasters the polite smile on her face. "I am."

Mary nods in the kind of way that Irene's come to hate. It seems to say, "Yes, I read that article and I believed every word. You poor thing. What must it be like to work for such a nightmare?"

Yes, Irene dislikes her intensely.

"Congratulations on the show," John says, saving her. "I hear nothing but great things."

“Oh, you must come," Mary urges, leaning down and taking John's hand, jostling Irene in the process. "Just let me know the date and I’ll get you a ticket."
Well, that's rude, she thinks, but then something in John's gaze hardens. He must think so, too.

"Any chance you can swing a pair of tickets?"

*Oh, he's good*, she thinks, biting her lip to hide her smirk.

She delivers the final parting shot by placing her hand over John's, the one Mary's not holding, and Mary drops the other as if burned.

"Oh, yes, of course. Silly me."

John's smile is serene as Mary bumbles through her goodbye, muttering something about him still having her number to let her know the date.

Eventually she departs, taking her horrid perfume with her, and Irene watches carefully as John takes a long pull of his drink before dropping his chin to his chest in defeat.

“I shouldn't have done that. That was cruel.”

Irene snorts. “That was perfect. If only we all could have run-ins with our exes that well executed.”

His look of regret quickly becomes a naughty smile and Irene knows exactly what John Watson must have looked like as a child. And it's adorable.

“She broke your heart, didn’t she,” she says after a moment and John gives a little shrug.

“She wasn’t the first.”

“Nor will she be the last, I’m sure.” She leaves it hanging there, laden with implication, but John merely stares at his drink, a soft smile adorning those rough and tumble features.

Yes, she thinks, Sherlock Holmes is a very lucky man.

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Sherlock isn’t one for deducing himself; he finds it beneath him since everything he does has reason and purpose – but even he would call what’s happening in this moment a massively classic strop.

His bag as been tossed on the nearest surface, the curtains are drawn, and he’s pulled his dressing gown around himself, despite the fact that he’s still in his shirt and trousers from the day’s rehearsal.

A knock comes at the door a moment later and a small, stupid part of him – the part that makes him sit up and trip over the coffee table on his way to answer it – thinks that perhaps the person on the other side might just be John.

He swings the door back without even bothering to glance through the peephole (his first mistake) and promptly feels his insides melt at the sight on the other side.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Mycroft examines the silver grip of his umbrella before offering Sherlock a tight smile that has no semblance of warmth whatsoever. “Miss Adler was ignoring my messages.”

“So you deem that a worthy excuse to come torture *me*? She’s on a date with John Watson, most likely at the nearest watering hole that serves the best martini. Chances are it’s Bar Centrale on 46th. Good day.” He slams the door, but Mycroft (blasted man) manages to get his umbrella in between
the latch and the frame, preventing it from locking.

“Remove that before I call the police,” he grits out, throwing the full weight of his body against the door.

“You forget, brother-mine, I cosigned on this place over a decade ago. I have every right to be here.”

Sherlock struggles for one more minute just so Mycroft can’t claim he didn’t make an effort, before huffing in a most put-upon manner and stepping away from the door. He barely restrains a giggle as Mycroft stumbles into the room.

“Well,” Mycroft begins, straightening his waistcoat, “now that that unpleasant business is behind us, shall we begin?”

“Begin what?” Sherlock snaps, taking his place once more on the couch and curling his knees up to his chest as he turns away from his brother.

“Begin the rather tedious process of saving you from yourself.”

Something heavy settles in Sherlock’s chest, but he prides himself on the fact that his voice comes out steady. “I don’t need saving.”

He can practically feel Mycroft’s judgmental glance flit around the apartment with disdain. “Clearly.”

“Why are you here, Mycroft? Don’t you have a country to run into the ground?”

“The country has agreed to behave itself for the time being so I can keep you from running this show into said metaphorical ground, as you so eloquently put it.”

“Piss off,” he grunts, burrowing furthering into the pillow. He can hear Mycroft sigh heavily and begin to poke at things with the tip of his umbrella. He should yell at him that everything is in its proper spot, but frankly, he doesn’t have the energy.

“I’m staying at the Waldorf.”

“Of course you are,” he mutters and Mycroft continues as if he’d said nothing at all.

“I don’t expect you to comply, but Mummy wants me to take you out to dinner.”

“Over my dead body.”

“So, I’ll expect you at Per Se this Friday at 7:00 sharp. Do make an effort to put some clothes on. I hear they frown on public nudity.”

He’s saved from replying by a ping on his phone, which he’s more than happy to ignore except that Mycroft picks it up instead, the bastard.

“You have a Google alert for John Watson?”

His breath shutter to a stop in his lungs. “That Google alert is for the show.”

“Interesting,” Mycroft drawls, “because it says ‘Google Alert for John Watson.”

“For Christ’s sake!” He stomps off the couch and snatches the phone from Mycroft’s hand, ignoring the smirk his brother throws in his direction.
John Watson spotted out with mystery woman at Bar Centrale where he ran into his ex, Mary Morstan. AWKWARD.

He doesn’t read beyond that (can’t read beyond that) and the phone hangs limply in his hand as he stares unseeingly at the wallpaper adorning the sitting room.

“Don’t get involved,” Mycroft states simply, without judgment or malice and Sherlock hates him a bit for that.

“I’m not involved,” he spits, throwing the phone into the cushions and stalking to the window and back again.

“Sherlock.”

“I’m not involved!”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft murmurs again, and it’s the quietness of it that halts the pacing, that makes him feel positively ancient. “We’ve been down this road before,” his brother continues quietly. “And it nearly ended your career.”

“I remember quite well, thank you.” He rubs his hands over his face, before pulling the curtains back and staring at the blackness of the park, framed by the distant lights of Fifth Avenue. “This is different. John is – he’s… he’s not Moriarty.”

“I know that,” Mycroft replies and Sherlock scoffs, eyes never leaving the mesmerizing patterns the lights throw on the reservoir.

“Of course. Why am I telling you? I’m sure you compiled a file the moment he was cast.”

“A drawer of files, actually, and you’re right. John Watson is not James Moriarty. Not by a long shot.” Sincerity was never Mycroft’s forte and yet, in this moment, he wears it well.

Sherlock turns and actually looks at his brother for the first time since he entered. Something passes between them – not necessarily an understanding, but perhaps something close. Mycroft has always been in his corner, a notion Sherlock will deny admitting until his dying day, but now, with this unfamiliar feeling of vulnerability washing over him, it’s not bad knowing someone has his back.

Because no amount of layers will make him feel less stripped bare than he does in this moment.

Mycroft clears his throat and Sherlock tries not to start at the sound. “I’ll be at the Waldorf.”

“So you said.”

“Keep in touch, brother-mine.”

“Sod off, Mycroft,” he replies, but it contains much less heat than it did when his brother first barged his way into the apartment.

And Sherlock finds himself oddly grateful for that.

xxxxxx

Sean Fagan is a well-respected, award-winning actor and he’s become so by keeping his head down and ignoring the usual extraneous crap that comes along with doing a high-profile production. He makes a point not to get involved in the gossip and the romance and the rumors. It’s just not his cup
of tea, and he prides himself on that.

But when he’s working with two idiots like John Watson and Sherlock Homes, drastic times call for drastic measures.

The only time they talk is when they’re onstage. They aren’t cold to each other off, they’re just – not overly warm. Friendly, but not seeking each other out. Which means that when they do communicate, when they’re onstage saying those words? Fucking fireworks, man.

And this production can’t afford to lose that.

These two men can’t afford to lose that.

He stalks into the rehearsal room, newspaper clutched in his fist, and he zeros in on his leading man in the corner, blowing on his mug of too-hot tea. How quaint.

It takes him four strides to reach him, grab his arm, and ignore the “Oi” John yelps as Sean steers him out of the room and into the hallway.

“Sean, what on earth – ?”

“What the hell are you doing, man?” he interrupts and John blinks dumbly at him.

“I have no idea – ”

“You guys were all buddy/buddy and now you can barely look at each other. And then I read this shit over my morning coffee and I love my morning coffee,” he says, waving a copy of The Post in front of the other man’s face.

And Sean can pinpoint the moment when the penny drops for John. His face goes slightly slack and his eyes dart to the paper in Sean’s hand, which he gingerly takes and scans the page, breathing out a whispered, “Shit,” as he clearly finds the article in question.

John Watson and Irene Adler: An Item?

“Look, he clearly feels something for you. We’re not idiots, despite what he thinks,” Sean continues, voice softening at seeing the look of utter regret on John’s face. “But just don’t – don’t wave it in front of his face. With his agent, no less.”

“That’s not what happened,” John murmurs, eyes never straying from the paper in his hands and the incriminating photo accompanying it: Irene, leaning in to kiss him on the cheek outside of a restaurant. “Has he seen it?”

“I don’t know,” Sean replies. “He’s not called today. We’re doing the end.”

John nods and visibly swallows, crinkling the paper in his ever-tightening fist. And this is why Sean doesn’t get involved. He deals with enough fake emotions on a daily basis that sometimes throwing the real ones into the mix becomes too much to handle. He probably shouldn’t have said anything, but he just cares, goddammit. And it’s infuriating.

“Look, date whomever you want. It’s not my business. I just – ”

“I’m in love with him,” John simply states, eyes finally leaving the paper, and Sean can do nothing but blink for a solid four seconds.

“Well fuck me sideways,” he eventually breathes.
Okay. Sean wasn’t expecting that.

You’re an idiot.

Harry fires the text off as she pockets her phone and makes her way to the uptown C train, silently cursing her brother and his ability to get himself into all sorts of messes, usually inadvertently.

Tell me something I don’t know, comes John’s reply and Harry snorts, because at least he’s honest with himself.

It’s a shit picture of you.

Thanks so much.

She shouldn’t be doing what she’s about to do, but John is a moron that she loves dearly. If she can make any part of this right, she will.

She passes 72nd St, and then 81st, the tiled murals on the walls in honor of the Natural History Museum always one of her favorite parts of the city. She hops out at 86th, climbing the stairs into the sunlight once more, eyebrows skyrocketing at the swanky buildings around her. A far cry from the tiny West Village walkup she occupies. And an even further cry from the dump she and John grew up in.

She nods at the doorman like she belongs there and punches the button for the 11th floor when she gets to the lift, cursing the twisting of her stomach. She’s done some idiotic things in her life, but this might very well take the cake.

The doors slide open and she cautiously steps out, all sense of confidence deserting her. The apartment marked 11F is at the end of the hall and she can hear the soft sounds of a violin coming from within.

Hm. John said he played.

She raises her hand to knock, swallowing once, before rapping her knuckles against the wood.

The violin abruptly cuts off and she allows a moment of regret at interrupting that beautiful sound, but then the door swings back and she’s staring at a very tall and very suspicious Sherlock Holmes.

“Harriet?”

“Hi,” she replies, not even bristling at the use of her full name.

“What are you doing at my apartment?”

She clears her throat and tilts her chin up in way she hopes is convincing. “I came to talk to you.”

“Well I hardly thought you came to stand awkwardly in my foyer,” he replies, stepping back and allowing her to pass into the apartment.

“Oh, um, thanks.” She steps in and inhales an interesting combination of cinnamon, tobacco, and gunpowder – something she only knows the scent of thanks to John.

“Tea?” Sherlock asks and she shakes her head.
“No, thanks. I can’t stay.”

He looks at her in an odd way – like he’s dissecting her slowly – and she self-consciously adjusts the bag on her shoulder.

“Then how can I help?” he asks, and even she knows he’s being more accommodating that necessary. Polite, even.

She clears her throat again and forces herself to meet his ridiculously blue eyes. No wonder John trips over his words in front of him.

“John doesn’t know I’m here.” It’s not what she meant to say, but it clearly piques Sherlock’s interest.

“I figured, considering he’s at rehearsal and you’re on what must be your lunch break. John didn’t give you my address nor did he tell you I wasn’t called today, so I’m assuming Clara did.”

“Oh don’t be mad at her. I was very persuasive.”

Sherlock’s ears pink. “I have no doubt.”

Harry smiles, glad to have found a chink in his armor and gestures towards the chair, the silent question implied. Sherlock nods and she sits, taking a moment to categorize the rather alarming knick-knacks he has scattered about. Including the skull on the mantle.

She makes it halfway around the room before she spots today’s copy of The Post on the table, pages scattered.

“Didn’t take you for a Post reader.”

He shrugs, but refuses to meet her eyes. “Nothing much of consequence in there.”

“No. And that’s precisely why I’m here.”

“Harriet – ”

“No, Sherlock, you have to listen to me.” She leans forward, calm façade dropping as she snatches the incriminating page from the table. “This is, well, it’s bullshit, frankly. Come on, even Irene must have told you so.”

“She’s not answering my calls.”

“I’m sure she’s busy,” Harry offers and Sherlock must hurt himself with how blatantly he rolls his eyes.

“I’m her only client. Now,” he says as he stands, “I’m honestly not sure why you feel the need to defend your brother to me, but there is no plausible scenario which would require John Watson to feel remotely guilty about this.”

“Of course there is,” she whispers, stopping him cold in the center of the room. “You know there is.”

He says nothing, but he doesn’t bolt and she takes that as a minor victory.

“My brother is an idiot. As are you,” she points out and he spins so quickly, jaw dropped in indignation, he nearly falls over. “You both clearly care about one another. And I know you’ve snogged. Ah!” she says, holding her finger up and stopping the rebuttal he never gets to verbalize.
“Don’t try to deny it. John tells me things.”

He mutters something with contempt and she’s pretty sure it’s “Siblings.”

She stands and crosses her arms over her chest because, yes, she is John’s sibling and this is what siblings do. Even if said sibling might kill her when he finds out.

“I’m here because I care about my brother, Sherlock. And my brother cares about you.” She approaches him as one would a frightened animal and, oh so carefully, places her hand on his arm. “Pretending that whatever this is doesn’t exist is killing him.” Sherlock sharply glances up and she smiles sadly. “Oh he puts up a good front and all – he’s not a great actor for nothing.” She squeezes his arm one more time before stepping away and gesturing towards the paper. “That was meaningless and you know it. But you’re too scared to confront how it makes you feel. There’s a word for that and it’s called, ‘jealousy.’”

He still remains silent, but his eyes narrow at the offending picture before flicking up to hers once more, as if something in that cerulean gaze has been unlocked. And for the first time since entering the apartment, she feels hope.

“Now,” she continues as she grabs her bag, “he’s asked me to go to A Streetcar Named Desire with him tonight, but frankly, if I see Mary Morstan, I’ll punch her so hard, I’ll rearrange her face. So don’t be a git, and take my ticket.” She holds out the thin yellow piece of paper and watches him glance at it like he’s truly come to a fork in the road and isn’t sure which path to take.

She supposes love is a bit like that.

His fingers close around the ticket and she lets go, watching him hold it reverently before pocketing it in his shirt.

“Then my work here is done,” she concludes, swinging her bag over her shoulder and heading for the door. “Oh, but, Sherlock,” she pauses, “you break his heart, I kill you.”

She gets the briefest glimpse of his eyes widening before she retreats to the hallway, a smug smile gracing her face. It must take a feat indeed to render the great Sherlock Holmes speechless. She’s not prone to self-satisfaction, but even she must admit she’s proud of herself.

“Harriet?” Sherlock calls just as the elevator arrives and she stops, turning to face the epitome of vulnerability in front of her.

“Yes?”

He struggles with his words for a moment, before “Thank you” leaves his lips.

“Oh don’t hurt yourself, Sherlock Holmes,” she teases, sending a wink in his direction before she steps onto the lift. “You’re welcome,” she calls just as the doors close and she thinks, for the first time in her life, that he might be the only person to call her Harriet and live to tell the tale.

She’s shockingly okay with that.

xxxxxx

John tucks his hands into his pockets as he stands off to the side, away from the throngs of people making their way into the Golden Theatre as the underslings that hang from the marquee tout how fantastic the show they’re about to see is. Frankly, it makes John feel a bit ill.
A throat clears behind him and he turns to find Sherlock, of all people, standing in front of him, staring at his shoes and holding up a ticket for the seat directly next to his.

“You’re not my sister,” he blurs out.

“Well-spotted,” Sherlock replies, eyes flicking up before promptly returning to his impeccably polished shoes. “Harriet was unable to accompany you tonight and she asked that I take her place.”

John’s eyes narrow because this has Harry’s fingerprints all over it. “Did she now.”

Sherlock glances up once more, smiling in a way that’s both shy and cheeky at the same time. “Indeed.”

John rolls his eyes and shakes his head fondly at the both of them. “Shall we, then?” he asks, gesturing at the long line making its way into the theatre.

Sherlock nods and falls into step beside him as John pretends his stomach doesn’t flip. The line is slow, though, and the silence inevitably becomes awkward.

“Look, about… well, everything,” John begins but Sherlock cuts him off.

“Don’t trouble yourself.”

“Sherlock—”

“I know, John,” he assures in a way that leaves absolutely no room for doubt. “I know.”

And John finds himself nodding as the events of the past 24 hours – hell, the past two weeks – flow under the metaphorical bridge. “Okay.”

Sherlock smiles in that rare, genuine way John has only seen once before, in the glow of a streetlamp when they were too drunk and too giddy to care about what anything meant. And John finds himself returning it as their tickets are scanned and they’re directed to their seats.

“I feel like this requires alcohol,” he murmurs only semi-jokingly as they pass the bar and Sherlock snorts.

“A show starring both of our exes? I should think so.” He heads in that direction, not even bothering to check if John is following, and places an order for a scotch and a vodka soda, handing the former to John as he catches up.

“Did you deduce the scotch, too?”

“Indubitably,” Sherlock replies with a smile.

They get a few double-takes on the way to their seats, ranging from the casual, “how do I know you?” to the “I know exactly who you are and I’m going to accost you at intermission.”

They settle into their aisle seats, but John doesn’t bother opening his Playbill. He knows exactly what Mary Morstan’s prior credits are.

“Thanks for coming,” John murmurs after a moment, Sherlock’s words coming back to him:

“A show starring both of our exes? I should think so.”

Meaning, not only did he know of John’s relationship with Mary, but he also alluded to his history.
with Moriarty. Something Irene assured he never spoke about.

Interesting.

“Of course,” Sherlock replies after a moment, returning his fierce gaze to the Playbill in his lap and picking apart the articles.

The lights eventually dim, the audience is instructed to turn off their cell phones, and John inhales deeply as the curtain comes up. His uneasiness, though, is nothing compared to the way Sherlock goes positively rigid beside him the moment James Moriarty steps onstage.

John’s hand finds his knee in the dark and squeezes gentle reassurance. “Breathe,” he quietly instructs and Sherlock does just that, inhaling a rattling breath while John’s thumb rubs circles on his kneecap. He can feel the warmth of his skin through the thin, yet expensive fabric as he draws mindless patterns on the knobby joint beneath it. Out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock visibly relaxes, sinking slowly in his seat as he focuses on the action onstage once more. And when Mary enters, Sherlock’s hand covers his and doesn’t move until intermission.

Thank goodness he knows this play because John would not have been able to tell you what happened at all during the first act.

As the lights come up, John squeezes his knee and Sherlock squeezes his hand, both letting go when the audience begins to stir. They refill their drinks and are only accosted once by an eager student getting her MFA at NYU.

He’s much more prepared for the second act. Which is why he’s much more unsettled by James Moriarty’s performance. The man is serpentine, playing Stanley Kowalski (for whom he’s really too slight) with a manic unsteadiness, bordering on schizophrenia.

This man once placed his hands on Sherlock and when Sherlock pushed him away, he set out to destroy him.

John hates him immediately with a ferocity he didn’t know he was capable of.

But this time, it’s Sherlock’s hand that finds him in the dark. That latches onto his knee and taps a gentle rhythm through his trousers that keeps John tethered to the here and now. He’s immeasurably thankful for it.

Especially when Moriarty’s gaze finds them at the curtain call and lingers in a way that turns John’s stomach.

He’s never been so thankful to escape a theatre before in his life.

They bob and weave their way through the crowd, pausing when they hit the street to watch the rows of theatres let their audiences loose. It’s an incredible sight, and one of his favorite New York has to offer, but Sherlock gently bumping into his side makes it infinitely better.

The stage door has been set up to accommodate the fans: metal gates have been brought out to create some sense of organization, and a big burly man stands guard, glaring warily at anyone that dare get too close.

“Do you want to say, ‘hi?’” Sherlock asks, nodding towards the commotion and John can’t keep the sour expression from crossing his face.

“Want to’ and ‘need to’ are two very different things,” he mutters, glancing up at Sherlock who’s
staring at the door with nothing short of dread.

Watching Moriarty from the safety of the orchestra is one thing, but John assumes that facing the prospect of seeing him eye to eye is a whole other matter entirely. And that’s what makes his decision for him. He should see Mary and thank her for the tickets, tell her what a lovely job she did, etc. but he will not be the one to put Sherlock in that position.

“I’ll text her and catch up another time,” he replies, smiling at Sherlock and tugging him away from the crowd and into the night.

xxxxxx

Sherlock keeps finding his eyes drawn to the diminutive man at his side who’s got his hands shoved in his pockets and is staring at the passing theatres like he can’t quite believe his luck.

And maybe he can’t.

John is sentimental about those sorts of things.

“Did Playbill ask you to fill out those questions?” he asks suddenly and Sherlock files through his mind palace quickly in an attempt to remember what on earth he’s talking about. It sounds vaguely familiar. Ah yes –

“You mean, for their ‘Cue & A?” Sherlock replies, voice dripping with disdain.

“Oh come on. It’s a cute play on words.”

“John, you should know by now I find nothing ’cute.”

“Fair enough,” John replies, chuckling slightly and not stepping away when they continually knock into one another.

“But yes, I did fill it out,” he mutters, sighing like the whole of the world is beneath him. And it is, save John Watson.

They walk through Shubert Alley, connecting 44th and 45th, a comfortable silence settling over them until they turn the corner and John pulls up short.

“Whoa.”

‘What – ?” Sherlock blinks, following John’s stunned gaze until his eyes land on the St. James Theatre in front of them, their own faces staring down at them from twenty feet up. Well, John is staring (in quite a fantastic way, actually), but Sherlock’s eyes are closed as he nuzzles the other man’s ear. Even now, Sherlock remembers the smell of John’s aftershave and the feel of his stubble against his lips. He’s not sure the memory will ever leave him.

He hopes to any deity listening that it doesn’t.

“I, um,” John clears his throat, “I guess they put it up.”

Sherlock can’t even mock him for the completely obvious remark. Not when he’s building an entire room in his mind palace for this moment alone. It’s going in the wing he’ll no doubt have to create for the man standing beside him.

“Holy shit, is that you?” a voice says to their right, and Sherlock turns to find a young man staring at the marquee.
“Um, yeah,” John replies and the kid grins.

“Awesome. Hey, can I get a photo of you two in front of it?”

“May I,” Sherlock mutters, taking great delight in the laugh John bites back as he turns to look at him, the silent question lingering between them. Sherlock shrugs, putting on an air of indifference, but if it gets him in closer proximity to John Watson, then by all means.

John’s arm comes around his waist and Sherlock finds his own resting on John’s shoulder. And because he’s an idiot, he lets his thumb trail along the skin by John’s collar in much the same way as he did the moment before the picture behind them was taken. John inhales and holds him tighter, which is why the smile the man captures in his picture is absolutely genuine.

They walk another four blocks before it even occurs to Sherlock that John’s home is located in the complete opposite direction.

xxxxxx

Cue & A: Macbeth Stars John Watson and Sherlock Holmes on Theatre Faves, Childhood Costumes, and Stephen Sondheim

John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, who star as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, respectively, in the new Broadway revival, fill out Playbill.com's questionnaire of random facts, backstage trivia and pop-culture tidbits.

Watson was last seen on Broadway in last season’s A Little Night Music and Holmes is back on the New York stage after a few years strutting his stuff in the West End. He was last seen in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine at the Old Vic.

Full Given Name:
Watson: “John H. Watson.”
Holmes: “William Sherlock Scott Holmes. He put H? What does the H. stand for?”

Where you were born/where you were raised:
Watson: “London, born and raised.”
Holmes: “In a barn, if you’re asking my mother.”

Zodiac Sign:
Watson: “Cancer.”
Holmes: “Deleted it.”

What your parents did/do for a living:
Watson: “Mother was a teacher, Dad was a mechanic.”
Holmes: “Mother was a mathematician. Father was besotted with her.”

Siblings:
Watson: “Younger sister named Harry. She’s the best.”
Holmes: “Unfortunately.”

Something you’re REALLY bad at:
Watson: “Typing.”
Holmes: “Social niceties.”
If you could go back in time and catch any show, what would it be:
Watson: “The original Sweeney Todd.”
Holmes: “Olivier’s Lear.”

Current show you have been recommending to friends:
Watson: “Matilda.”
Holmes: “I don’t have friends.”

Favorite showtune:
Watson: “Soliloquy’ from Carousel”
Holmes: “Being Alive’ from Company”

The one performance – attended – that you will never forget:
Watson: “Mark Rylance in Jerusalem”
Holmes: “John Watson in A Little Night Music”

Your personal acting idols, living or dead:
Watson: “Christopher Plummer and Jimmy Stewart”
Holmes: “Lawrence Olivier and Peter O’Toole”

MAC or PC:
Watson: “PC”
Holmes: “MAC – wait, he said PC?”

Most played song on your iPod at the moment:
Watson: “Oh no, Harry’s had my iPod for the last week – it’s probably One Direction or something like that.”
Holmes: “Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor”

Most-visited websites:
Watson: “BBC News, Playbill, ESPN”

Last book you read:
Watson: “Will in the World by Stephen Greenblatt”
Holmes: “Shakespeare’s Freedom by Stephen Greenblatt”

Must-see TV Show:
Watson: “Orphan Black and Game of Thrones”
Holmes: “I recently discovered Shark Week. It’s fascinating.”

Some films you consider classics:
Holmes: “The Seventh Seal, Throne of Blood, Treasure Island.”

Performer you would drop everything to go see:
Watson: “Sherlock Holmes”
Holmes: “John Watson”

Best gift you ever received:
Watson: “My sister gave me a first edition of The Picture of Dorian Gray. I’m still too scared to open it, lest I tear a page.”
Holmes: “An Irish Setter.”
Favorite Halloween costume you ever wore:
Watson: “I think I was a pumpkin when I was three.”
Holmes: “Pirate. I was eight.”

Three favorite cities:

First stage kiss:
Watson: “Lucy Miller in the year six Nativity play. It wasn’t scripted.”
Holmes: “I suppose it was my Rosalind in As You Like It in school. I can’t remember her name.”

Moment you knew you wanted to perform for a living:
Watson: “Mine came quite late. I was in my mid-twenties and feeling a bit lost. A friend took me to a performance of Sondheim’s Into the Woods and I was knocked sideways.”
Holmes: “When I realized it irked my brother more than anything else in the world.”

Favorite liquid refreshment:
Watson: “Scotch.”
Holmes: “Water is the obvious choice, but if you’re looking for alcoholic libations, then vodka, I suppose. Or a fine red wine.”

Pre-show rituals or warm-ups:
Holmes: “I retreat to my mind palace.”

Worst flubbed line/missed cue/onstage mishap:
Watson: “I guess you could say I had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction in Anything Goes. The ladies in the front row got quite a show that day.”
Holmes: “I’ve never missed a cue.”

What drew you to this project?
Watson: “Shakespeare is clearly a departure from my usual projects. I suppose I wanted to prove something. And the chance to do Shakespeare with Sherlock Holmes? I’d be a tosser to pass that opportunity up.”
Holmes: “Originally it was the chance to play Macbeth, but now I’m more than content to watch John Watson do things with it I never would have dreamed of.”

Most challenging role you have played on stage:
Watson: “This one.”
Holmes: “This one.”

Something about you that surprises people:
Watson: “I’m shorter than I look onstage.”
Holmes: “I like bees.”

Career you would want if not a performer:
Watson: “Doctor.”
Holmes: “Detective.”

Three things I can’t live without:
Watson: “My sister, rain, tea. Christ, could I sound more English?”
Holmes: “My microscope, my dressing gown, my Norton Shakespeare.”
Words of advice for aspiring performers:
Watson: “Educate yourself. Read and see as many plays as humanly possible.”
Holmes: “Run far away as fast as you can.”

Mycroft shakes his head as he reads the article on his phone amid the hustle and bustle of a Friday evening at Per Se.

Even their separate interviews sound like bloody love notes. These are treacherous waters and they’ll have to navigate accordingly, yet he allows himself this moment.

He sighs with a fond, yet wary smile as he puts his phone away and orders the most expensive bottle of wine on the list, steepling his fingers as the clock ticks slowly by.

And when Sherlock slides into the seat across from him at approximately 7:08pm, Mycroft doesn’t say a word.

Chapter End Notes

- Bar Centrale is real and it really is sort of hidden. There's no sign. You'd never know it was there unless you knew to look for it.
- The Waldorf is The Waldorf-Astoria, a very famous hotel on Park Ave. and 49th St. (just in case you haven't heard of it).
- Per Se is a super swanky restaurant at the top of the Time Warner Building in Columbus Circle. It's nearly impossible to get into and will bankrupt you if you actually go.
- The Golden Theatre is located on 45th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues.
- An 'undersling' is the thing that hangs from the marquee that features from the pull-quotes from the best reviews.
- The St. James Theatre (where Macbeth will eventually move) is on 44th between 8th and Broadway. If you've ever seen the movie Birdman, that's where it takes place.
- "Cue and A" is a real thing that actors fill out for Playbill.com. They're often quite hilarious.
- Mark Rylance starred in a play by Jez Butterworth on Broadway called Jerusalem. He won the Tony Award for it. And there are no words to describe how incredible it was.
‘I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, 
Straining upon the start. The game’s afoot: 
Follow your spirit; and upon this charge, 
Cry ‘God for Harry! England! and St. George!’

- Henry V, Act III, Scene 1

“Are you sure you want to eat that?”

Sherlock quirks his mouth as Mycroft’s fork hovers over the mashed potatoes that have come with his filet mignon.

“Brother, I would appreciate it if you would just sod off.”

“Oh I would,” Sherlock replies, leaning back and dabbing his mouth with his white linen napkin, “except you invited me here and told me my attendance was imperative, so…” he gestures around, “here I am.”

Mycroft glares as he digs into the potatoes and pops a bite into his mouth, enjoying the way the taste of butter, garlic, and salt explodes on his tongue. He will not let Sherlock take this one small joy away from him.

“How long are you staying?” his brother asks after a moment. “Not long, I hope.”

“Through first preview,” he replies, bracing himself for the inevitable.

“What?” Sherlock splutters. “First preview is over a week away! We have the entirety of tech to get through! I won’t stand for it. New York will not stand for it.”

“Sherlock, lower your voice,” he instructs, kicking his little brother under the table while smiling at the waiter looking at them in concern. “I actually am here on business, if you must know. You aren’t my only concern, nor my main one, come to think of it.”

“I beg your pardon? I’m not at the top of your list?” And of course Sherlock would take offense at that. Of course he would.

Mycroft rolls his eyes, surrendering his mashed potatoes as he pushes the plate away, appetite now gone. “Why should you be? You’re getting ready to star in a show on Broadway – one you’ve wanted to do since Mummy let you read Macbeth at entirely too young an age, if you ask me.”

“Not true,” Sherlock mutters and Mycroft ignores him.

“Mrs. Hudson is your backer, Greg and Irene are holding your leash… and then we come to John Watson.” Mycroft smiles at the way Sherlock’s head snaps up.

“What about John Watson?”

“You tell me.” He leaves the words hanging in the air, taking a careful sip of his wine as he leans his elbows on the table, watching Sherlock fidget under his scrutiny.
Sherlock never fidgets.

“There’s nothing to tell,” he murmurs after a moment. “John Watson is… ordinary.” And yet the way his brother says the word proves that John is anything but.

Even Mycroft seems completely stumped by him. Anyone who can tolerate Sherlock for more than a quarter of an hour deserves special merit somewhere, but John – an Olivier Award winner, Tony Award nominee, and decorated former member of Her Majesty’s Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers – is certainly not lacking when it comes to accolades. Furthermore, he seems like an all-around decent human being, if all reports are to be believed.

So what on earth is he doing with Sherlock Holmes?

“Ordinary though you think he may be, just… be careful.”

Sherlock snorts but Mycroft remains firm, gaze unwavering as Sherlock fidgets again and buries his nose in the dessert menu.

“John would never do any harm to me,” he murmurs after a moment and Mycroft, for once in his life, believes him. “I’ll think I’ll have the tart,” he concludes, dropping his menu and looking at Mycroft with a grin that’s positively evil. “Shouldn’t share, though. Wouldn’t want you to lose what little ground you’ve gained in the battle against your body fat percentage.”

And Mycroft wonders how it’s possible to both love and loathe a person so much all at the same time.

xxxxxx

Despite her forty-plus years in the business, even Martha Hudson is not immune to final run-in-the-room jitters.

Her hair is sprayed to within an inch of its life, her lipstick is perfect, and her smile is wide as she greets her fellow producers at the door to the rehearsal room. The entire company moves into the theatre on Tuesday for tech and this afternoon, these last few hours, are their final in a space that has become as comforting as home.

She glances around the chaos, spotting Sally marching across the room with a stopwatch, Molly talking in hushed tones with Gregory, and Sherlock peeking out from an adjoining room where most of the cast is preparing/hiding.

“Hello!” she trills to someone she should know, but frankly, they’re all blurring together in a haze of fake smiles and botched plastic surgery. To be perfectly honest, she could go with an herbal soother right about now, but she promised Sherlock she’d hold off until the speaking portion of the afternoon was over.

"Oh, Gregory,” she cries as he speeds past her, “I have someone I want you to meet."

"Just a tic, Mrs. Hudson – got one more note for the guys."

"Cutting it a bit close, dear, aren't we?"

"Nothing huge, I promise," he replies, placing a quick peck on her cheek as he dashes from the room.

She trusts her boys with her life – well, maybe not her life, she thinks, remembering the time
Sherlock blew out the windows of her living room, but certainly her money. And if Gregory has one more note for them, then so be it. Who is she to judge? She’s just the checkbook.

“All well and good here, Martha?” Molly asks as she sidles up to her and hands her an herbal soother with a wink.

“Bless you, child,” Martha replies, before popping it in her mouth accompanied by a swig of tea. “Now what’s all this business with final notes? Surely the boys are nervous enough without you changing the rules this late in the game.”

“Greg thinks Sherlock should take John’s shirt fully off in the murder scene,” Molly simply states and Martha glances at her for a moment before taking another swig.

“Well that’s fine then.”

“Thought so,” the younger woman replies with a sly smile. “Now get the rest of your wheeling and dealing done before that soother kicks in or Greg’ll have my head.”

Martha gives a little mock salute before plastering her fake smile on her face once more and disappearing into the crowd.

“Darling, how are you?”

xxxxxx

Sherlock has never taken particular cares to acknowledge how his behavior affects his fellow castmates, but even he knows his pacing is helping absolutely no one.

There’s a kind of giddy anxiety hovering in the air, though Sherlock is feeling more of the latter and less of the former, his insecurities hovering on his shoulders and gradually adding more weight the closer they get to two o’clock. But then reason kicks in, ever-reliable reason, and he remembers that he’s ready for this part – more than ready. And with John Watson at his side, there’s no way they’ll falter. Speaking of –

He grabs Sean as he passes by, stuffing a donut in his mouth. “Have you seen John?”

Sean eyes him warily as he swallows, before nodding towards the hall. “Last I saw, he was sequestered in an adjacent room. But you didn’t hear it from me.” He gives Sherlock another once over as he leave, as if weighing him and finding him wanting.

What the hell was that about?

He files the moment away in his mind palace to take out and examine later at a more opportune time, before striding across the hardwood floor and flinging the door to the hall open.

The first studio he comes upon is empty, but the second proves much more valuable. On the other side, staring out of the window is his partner, his husband, his king. His John.

His John?

Lock it up, Holmes, he chastises.

The door squeaks as he pulls it open and John turns at the sound, smiling softly as Sherlock tiptoes into the room, as if honoring the silence.

“It’s just me.”
“There’s no 'just' about you,” John replies as he turns back to the window and Sherlock's cautious steps falter.

What does one say to that? His mind palace is infuriatingly unhelpful.

“You're nervous about something,” he opts for instead, memorizing the tension in John's shoulders and the outline of the fists in his pockets.

John gives him another tight smile as Sherlock stands beside him, overlooking the busyness of 42nd St. “What gave me away?”

“Why are you nervous?”

"Perhaps it could be the room full of people next door, awaiting to lay down their judgment."

Sherlock snorts. "If that's the way you approach it, it's a miracle you've survived in the business this long."

"Don't I know it," is John's wry response.

"But you don’t get nervous," Sherlock counters and John raises an eyebrow.

“Actually, I get nervous about a great many things, not the least of which is performing in front of other people, but that’s not the issue.”

Sherlock whips around, glancing at him with a look of incredulity, and John tilts his head, smiling in that way Sherlock has come to classify as ‘fond.’

“I have stage fright.”

“No, you don’t.”

John snorts. “My stomach would beg to differ with you.”

“But you’ve been in eight Broadway shows! And that’s not counting Off-Broadway, Regional, or the West End!”

John looks impressed as he returns his gaze to the skyscrapers in the distance. “Good to know you’re my own personal ibdb page.”

"Then what is the issue?"

"Pardon?"

"You said performing in front of other people wasn't the issue here. So, what is it?"

John sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose, murmuring into his hand. "Greg wants you to take my shirt off."

And Sherlock will swear until his dying day that he doesn't choke on his saliva. "What?"

"In the murder scene, Greg wants you to take my shirt off. Presumably it'll be covered blood."

"Okay." Sherlock's gaze darts from his shoes to John's resigned look and back to his shoes once more. "Is that what's bothering you? I didn't take you for a shy man."
Indeed, the constant ghost of John's lips against his own prove just how not shy the other actor is.

But John is silent for enough moments to bring Sherlock's gaze to his once more and what Sherlock finds there takes his breath away. It's hard and yet vulnerable. Angry and yet scared. Unyielding and yet broken. And when John's fingers find the first button on his shirt, Sherlock audibly swallows.

He follows the path of skin that each unhooked button exposes, memorizing every freckle, every groove, every blonde hair that is revealed as John’s hands inch down his pale blue shirt.

He wants to ask what on earth John is doing, but he can't. His voice is caught in his too-tight throat, holding the very breath in his lungs hostage.

But when John reaches the bottom and gently tugs the shirt from his shoulders, it all becomes clear. The fabric falls away revealing the angry, puckered scar marring the skin near John’s left clavicle and he assumes its match marks John’s back, where the bullet ripped through muscle and tissue and tendon to come out on the other side.

Sherlock’s hand twitches at his side in an effort to reach forward, but he restrains himself, tugging his arm back to his side.

“I’ve never been shirtless onstage. Trouser-less, yes, but not shirtless. An odd thing, really,” John murmurs, smiling slightly before clearing his throat. “This will be the first time that anybody other than those that have shared my dressing room will see my scar. It’s a… heady point in one’s life to come to.”

Sherlock nods because he’s still not sure he trusts his voice and whatever confidence he has in his ability to speak flies out the window the moment John takes his hand and gently places it on the skin that’s been torn and repaired. Broken and healed. Sherlock inhales sharply as John lets go, letting the other man’s pale fingers trace his warm flesh. He can feel the heavy weight of John’s gaze on his face, but he doesn’t dare lift his eyes. He’d drown.

“So you’re the first – ” John begins, but Sherlock cuts him off.

“It’s a privilege,” he murmurs, running his thumb over the scar once more before reaching down and pulling John’s shirt back up on his shoulders. “An honor.”

And before John can answer, the door is opening with its damn telltale creak, and Greg’s salt and pepper hair appears a moment later.

"Sherlock, are you in here? Ah – " the director stops, trying and failing to hide a smile. "I see you've already gotten my note. Five minutes, boys," he announces with a wink before disappearing once more.

Both men are staring at the door, mouths open but whatever had been about to pass – whether they be retorts, jokes, or downright denials – never reaches the charged air around them.

“Well, then,” John clears his throat, buttoning up his shirt once more, much to Sherlock’s dismay. “Once more unto the breach?”

“Cry ‘God for Harry, England, and St. George,” Sherlock groans and John huffs out a laugh, but Sherlock can still read the uneasiness in his posture. “John,” he grabs his arm as he passes, halting him in his tracks, “you’ve got this. Don’t let anyone tell you differently.”

And then Sherlock sees it: that genuine smile that makes his grey and black world light up in Technicolor.
“Thank you,” John replies, leaning up on his tiptoes and placing the lightest of kisses on the taller man’s cheek, which is why Sherlock doesn’t remember much of what happens in the minutes that follow.

Apparently John leads him to the other room where a lot of people (people he doesn’t notice until the run is well underway) are waiting. Greg supposedly gives a speech and he vaguely remembers Molly giving them a surreptitious thumbs up, but then – as John prepares to make his first entrance, as his back straightens and his shoulders broaden – time stops.

And it’s bloody beautiful.

xxxxxx

The first few minutes of the run are a blur of nerves and adrenaline in John’s caffeine-fueled mind, but one thing remains constant: Sherlock Holmes.

The man is his anchor amidst the current, keeping him stable and balanced and present as the rest of the world moves around him. And so lost is he in the magnetic pull he has with his fellow actors and the magic he knows they’re creating, that the murder scene creeps up on him with the stealth of a thief, tapping him on the shoulder with the icy dread of an unwelcome guest.

“My husband,” Sherlock breathes as John enters and all notions of unwelcome-ness fly swiftly from his thoughts.

“I have done the deed,” John murmurs, feeling the energy in the room kick up another notch as they volley their lines back and forth. “This is a sorry sight,” John says to his hands, and Sherlock steps forward engulfing them in his larger ones.

“A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight.”
There’s one did laugh in’s sleep, and one cried ‘Murder!’
That they did wake each other: I stood and heard them:
But they did say their prayers, and address’d them
Again to sleep.” John shakes his head and Sherlock cups his cheeks, a move he’s made a dozen times, yet his thumbs have never quite traced his eyelashes in quite that fashion.

“There are two lodged together.”
“One cried ‘God bless us!’ and ‘Amen’ the other;
As they had seen me with these hangman’s hands.
Listening their fear, I could not say ‘Amen,’
When they did say ‘God bless us!’” John chokes out, allowing Sherlock to push him gently onto the makeshift bed behind him.

“Consider it not so deeply,” Sherlock breathes, climbing on top of him and straddling his thighs, tilting his chin up to run his thumb across his cheek once more, eyes silently telling him that it will all be okay as he reaches for the first button on John’s shirt.

“But wherefore could not I pronounce ‘Amen’?”
“I had most need of blessing, and ‘Amen’
Stuck in my throat,” John whispers, voice hiccupping over the words the more Sherlock progresses on his shirt.

“These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.” Sherlock murmurs against John’s stubbled skin as he leans down, nuzzling his jaw before connecting their lips and pushing the shirt off John’s shoulder.
There are a few gasps in the room and John *hates* that their reactions are seeping through that thin veil that separates performer from audience. But then Sherlock’s thighs tighten on his own and he pulls away, piercing John with a look that says, ‘Look only at me. Think only of me.’ And it works, because the lines tumble out of him as Sherlock continues his ministrations, pulling the shirt all the way off, before balling it up and tossing it to the floor.

“*Methought I heard a voice cry ’Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep’, the innocent sleep, Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care, The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, Chief nourisher in life's feast, --*” he inhales harshly, swallowing past the tears that have nothing to do with the performance at hand and everything to do with the care and tenderness that Sherlock is showing him at the moment.

The younger man says his lines with an edge and yet his actions belie his words as he handles John like something precious.

John eventually buries his face in Sherlock’s chest, no doubt muffling his delivery, but then Sherlock places a kiss on his head and one on his mangled shoulder, before cupping the back of his hair like one would a child. And John can’t be arsed to worry about his volume at the moment.

The scene earns a round of applause as Sherlock gently tugs him ‘offstage’ to the back of the room where they remain side by side, arms brushing, until John has to make his next entrance. The energy between them is building with all the magnetism of poles on the earth. And when Lady M dies, when Sherlock is no longer sharing that stage with him, John feels it more acutely than the piece of metal that tore through his shoulder. He is desolate and yet desperate, manic and passionate, right up until the moment Macduff slays him and carries his body off the stage.

Sean is gentle as he lowers John to his feet once more, hanging onto his shoulders until he’s sure John is steady. Sean gives a brief nod, which John returns, before grabbing the prop of Macbeth’s head and re-entering the fray, holding it high in victory.

It’s an odd thing to watch one’s funeral, fake though it may be. But the feeling diminishes as the character of Macbeth slowly floats away, leaving him tired and sore, yet exhilarated. He catches Ian’s eye in the corner and the older man winks, an infinitesimal action which John doesn’t even have the energy to return.

But then he catches movement out of the corner of his right eye, beyond the action in the center of the room. And leaning against the opposite wall is his leading man, his partner, his spouse, hastily wiping a tear from his cheek and rubbing at eyes whose redness John can see from twenty feet away.

Is Sherlock… crying?

And before he can convince his brain that his eyes are playing tricks, the man himself looks up, gaze latching onto him and pinning John where he stands.

The room is silent. People are still speaking but he hears nothing because, in this moment, he lives and breathes Sherlock Holmes and his body is too drained, too overwhelmed to sustain itself on that particular brand of sustenance. Sherlock’s eyes drill into his own, seeing the very thoughts in his head until his every secret is laid bare before that charismatic, infuriating, amazing enigma of a man.

And just when John thinks his legs won’t bear the weight of his body anymore, sound filters through the haze once more, slowly, building and building until he realizes the deafening din is applause.
Andrew, his Banquo, is nudging him in the back and he manages a sluggish, sheepish smile as he accepts a clap on the back from Sean and meets Sherlock center stage.

The taller man leans down and for one terrifying, yet thrilling moment John thinks he’s about to get snogged in the middle of the room in front of their fellow actors, producers, and stage managers, yet Sherlock’s lips merely graze his ear as he whispers, “That was extraordinary and don’t you ever, ever forget it.”

John isn’t sure he could forget this moment if he tried.

Sherlock pulls away and takes his left hand as Sean takes his right, practically pulling him down into a bow because his attention is still on the feel of Sherlock’s lips against his ear and his breath against his skin. It is most certainly not on the room full of people in front of him, clapping like their lives depend on it.

Well, he thinks, that’s one way to close out a rehearsal process.

Well ho-ly shit.

Irene shares a look with Greg as the director walks forward and hugs John, followed begrudgingly by Sherlock, before proceeding on down the line. It’s a look that says, ‘This is ten years in the making and they just knocked it out of the fucking park.’

It takes her a moment to pry herself from her seat, glued to it as she was. For a play that’s existed for nearly 400 years, she found it surprisingly harrowing. And that was without the costumes, sets, lights, and most importantly, blood. It’s a testament to the talent on the stage that they can make something so familiar so exhilarating once again.

“Come here, you beautiful man,” she beckons to John before taking his face her hands and planting one directly on his lips. “God I wish I played for your team. Ah well, it’s for the best.”

And his look of befuddled shock will amuse her for hours to come.

“Darling,” she crows next, reaching for Sherlock and tugging him close.

“You never call me ‘darling.”

“I thought I’d start.”

“Please don’t.”

“Oh don’t take my fun away now,” she pouts as she swats at his arm, before bringing him down so she can place a kiss on his cheek. “Sherlock, that was the best thing I’ve seen you do, and I’ve seen everything,” she murmurs, suddenly serious.

He pulls away but gone is his haughty demeanor and ‘above it all’ attitude. Instead, there’s a warmth in his eyes that she’s sure is mirrored in hers. “Thank you.”

“Truly, I just…” she trails off because her words are actually deserting her, which is not something that happens often. Or ever.

And Sherlock must know it because he bends down and places a soft kiss on her cheek in return, as John makes a noise that’s half snort and half sigh.
“Aw, look. You can play nice. Miracles do happen.”

Irene gives him a playful shove just as Mike comes to steal him away anyway, and she doesn’t miss the look the two men in front of her share before they’re parted.

“As if you could ever think our ‘date’ was anything more than a drink. Not when he looks at you like that,” she murmurs, nudging him slightly as Sherlock watches John get introduced to a few producers on the other side of the room.

He makes a non-committal noise yet his gaze never strays from the diminutive man with a preternaturally sized talent. And she allows him this moment, this calm, before she drops the particular bombshell she has no desire to voice.

“Moriarty’s making rumblings.”

Sherlock’s head turns so quickly, he must injure his neck. “What kind of rumblings?”

“The kind we don’t like,” she replies. “There’s nothing concrete yet, but…”

“It’s starting.”

“It’s starting,” she confirms before watching the absolute joy that seems to pervade every corner of the room except their particular nook. “You did well today, kid.”

“I can do better.”

“I know.” She smiles as Sherlock raises an eyebrow at her, before she nods to John. “Don’t let that one go, yeah? He’s a keeper.”

Sherlock follows her gaze once more and something soft passes over his features for the briefest of moments, before the hard, calculating man she’s come to know and love makes a reappearance. “I don’t have the luxury of keeping anyone.”

“Oh, we both know that’s not true,” is her soft reply and she fixes him with an inscrutable look that conveys a notion of Don’t fuck this up, before she turns and strides over to Martha to offer her congratulations before the older woman’s soother truly takes hold and she needs help finding her car.

Sally is beginning to round up the cast and as Greg sees the audience to the door. The actors will likely get a round of notes before rehearsal wraps up, and then they’ll all go out for a well-deserved drink.

She can only hope it’s as successful as the last time Sherlock decided to imbibe.

She winks at John as she catches his eye before sidling up to Molly and slipping a hundred into her pocket.

“First round’s on me.”

xxxxxx

It’s hardly a shock that they end up back at Pony Bar and Greg watches with no small amount of glee as Sherlock enters the establishment with more than a little trepidation.

“How’s the floor? Still defective?” John teases and Sherlock rolls his eyes.

“It seems that any… abnormalities… have been rectified,” he allows as Greg barks out a laugh.
“Don’t worry,” he assures, “we won’t let you get soused again,” to which Sherlock offers a tight smile and a rude hand gesture.

Though admittedly, the man could use a little loosening up. He’s been more high-strung than usual and that’s saying something.

Greg begins rattling off beer orders as Molly puts Irene’s fifty on the bar, doling out the pints as fast as the bartender fills them.

“Cheers,” John calls as Greg turns and hands him one, before shoving another into Sherlock’s hand.

“Pace yourself, for the love of god,” he instructs with a stern look at John who glances back with all the innocence of a naughty five-year-old. And as he watches them disappear into a corner to no doubt talk shop, it might be the first time in all his years of directing that he actually wants two people to break his cardinal rule.

Because if John Watson and Sherlock Holmes do not shag soon, all of Broadway might suffer the consequences.

Chapter End Notes

- A rehearsal process concludes with what is called the ‘final run in the room.’ It's the last run-through of the show before the company moves into the theatre and begins tech.
- ibdb.com is just like imdb, but for Broadway.
The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth

Chapter Summary

“Do you want to talk about it?” Molly tries, immediately hating how trite that sounds.

And if his tone is anything to go by, Sherlock must agree. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

She snorts. “We both know that’s not true.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
   Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth.”
- A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act 1, Scene I

Sally isn’t exactly known for her patience, but thank god she loves her men so much, because that love and respect is the only thing keeping her from throttling all of their necks.

“For christ’s sake, Sean!” she yells as another mini-Snickers bar goes flying by her head.

“Sorry!” the American calls back, ducking in shame and hiding behind Ian who hits him over the head with his prop goblet.

“I told you, ‘No sneaking chocolate onstage!’"

“But it’s tech!” he groans. “Chocolate, coffee, and whiskey are the only things fueling me right now. And not necessarily in that order.”

She shakes her head at the cheeky bastard and continues to go over her cue script while Anderson fixes a problem with the lights.

“How we doin’, Anderson?” Greg calls on the god mic from the house and Anderson gives him a thumbs up from his perch at his tech table, multiple computer screens lighting his face up blue amidst the black.

Sally sighs heavily as she watches Andrew toss chocolate pieces into Sean’s mouth. Tech is tedious at the best of times and she really should reprimand them for having food on the stage, but they’re in their 8th hour of a 10/12 and morale is taking a blow.

"If I find one smear of chocolate on my stage, Sean Fagan, you will scrub its entirety with a toothbrush."

The young man salutes and proceeds to toss chocolate back and forth with his fellow actors.

“I miss Mars Bars,” Greg groans from his seat in the row in front of her and she smiles, commiserating.
“Aren’t they the same as a Milky Way?” Andrew calls and Sally hisses.

“You bite your tongue, Andrew McGrath!”

The young actor holds up his hands in innocence, narrowly avoiding a swipe from the Brits onstage. "My mistake! My mistake!"

"That's like saying baseball is just like cricket," Greg calls to boos from his fellow Britons.

"Nah," Sean laughs, "At least I understand baseball."

"Heathen," Sally shouts and, as much fun as she's having, Anderson is giving her the go-ahead and, sadly, it's back to business. "Greg, we're good to go."

"Excellent. Settle down, you lot. Clara, take the chocolate away from the children."

Clara appears from stage left a moment later in her blacks and her headset, snatching the bag and ignoring the desolate groans and cries of "No!" that follow her back to her position.

“Thank you, Clara,” Sally sweetly says as her ASM gives a mock salute before disappearing into the wings. “Moving onto Macbeth’s speech in scene seven.”

“Where’s my Thane?” Greg asks after a moment and Andrew gives an exaggerated shrug before popping another smuggled chocolate into his mouth.

Sally sighs as she picks up the microphone again, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingertips. Sometimes her job is a bit like wrangling cats.

“John, I need you onstage, please. John Watson to the stage.”

xxxxxx

His name buzzes over the intercom and he tosses the book he'd been reading onto his mini-couch, standing to stretch briefly before making his way down the winding staircase to the stage.

“Heyo!” one of the crew guys yells as he passes him in the hallway and John chuckles. There is no one more gruff or genuine than a member of Local 1. Most of these guys have been in the business for generations, wielding tools that have belonged to their fathers and grandfathers. The only thing stronger than their love of the job is their New York accent.

The stage is momentarily blinding as he steps onto it from the dark recesses of the wings, giving a little wave to the completely pitch black house and knowing someone out there will see him.

“Hi, John!” Molly calls a moment later from somewhere on house right and John smiles before greeting the rest of his company.

“Save me any chocolates?” he murmurs to Sean who glowers in Clara’s direction.

“They’ve been confiscated.”

“For good reason!” the ASM calls back and Sean points at his eyes and then points at Clara, as if to say ‘I'm watching you.’

“Where’s Himself?”

“In his dressing room, I suppose,” John replies. “Haven’t seen him since the break.”
“So there’s been no… movement on that front?” Sean asks as delicately as possible, which is actually remarkably gentle considering the last time Sean tried to do something gently, he took out a set piece and nearly cost Ian his good eye.

John shakes his head and gives a little shrug that even he knows is half-assed. Sean looks at him in a way that’s not quite pity, but it’s close.

“He’s an idiot. Talented, but an idiot all the same.”

“Ta,” John laughs as Greg’s voice booms over the god mic once more.

“Gents, clear the stage if you would for John’s monologue, but don’t wander far.”

The men scatter, most finding seats in the house to watch. It’ll be their only opportunity once performances begin when they’re sequestered backstage for the duration.

The lights above John quickly warm his face and it’s not long before he’s sweating through his layers. Sally puts him on a hold so Anderson can focus a light and Sarah takes the moment to run onstage and strap his sword to his belt as someone catcalls from the audience.

Sean, most likely, the bastard.

“How do I look?”

“Like someone hoping to be thrown on the nearest surface,” she replies with a wink that makes his cheeks flush.

But before he can stutter out some semblance of a reply, his phone vibrates in his back pocket and he pulls it out to find a text from Sherlock.

It looks good. - SH

John’s head immediately snaps up and he squints into the lights. His phone vibrates again.

Front mezz. – SH

Don’t tell me you can read lips from that distance.

Okay. I won’t tell you I can read lips from this distance. – SH

He smiles into the blackness and shakes his head as Sarah tightens the belt one more notch.

“Good?”

“Good,” he replies and Sarah gives a thumbs up to the house before disappearing backstage once more.

His phone buzzes again and he eagerly pulls it out, hoping to see another sarcastic and slightly flirtatious text from Sherlock, but Mary Morstan is the name that’s written across the screen and his stomach immediately plummets.

You never did come say hi.
“John Watson, is that a mobile on my stage?” Sally asks over the god mic and John jumps.

“No, ma’am,” he calls back, stealthily slipping the phone into his back pocket with a cheeky grin.

The rest of the evening is slow going, but progress is made. They’re nearly through the end of act two and they’ll be able to hopefully start running the show in full, assuming there aren’t any technical disasters between now and then. After all, first preview is only four days away and that is positively exhilarating and yet utterly petrifying.

He gets back to his dressing room just after 11pm, peeling off the leather trousers that are practically plastered to his skin. Nate, his dresser, stifles a snort as John hops on one foot and John glares at him in the mirror.

“Aren’t you supposed to be helping me?”

“Possibly, but this is just too much fun.”

John throws the trousers at him once he gets them off with a rude hand gesture and a muttered, “Git.” Nate’s been with him on his last four shows – nearly seven years now – and that’s not bad for a showbiz marriage.

His phone buzzes on the counter in front of his mirror and he peers over to find Mary’s name once again alighting his screen. He swipes his thumb across and punches in his code, barely suppressing an eye roll.

Dinner?

He should. He doesn’t necessarily want to, but she did get him those tickets. And she’s making an effort at being friendly – the least he can do is be cordial.

Sure. My break is from 5:30-7:30 tomorrow. he types back, staring at the words a moment before pressing send.

Great. Angus’? is her immediate reply and he sighs because of course she’d suggest Angus’. They only had their first date there and practically every date thereafter.

I’ll meet you there.

He tosses the phone on the table once more and tugs on his street clothes with more force than necessary. He’s dog-tired and just anxious to get the show up and running. And even more anxious to faceplant on his bed.

“You received a text you weren’t pleased about,” comes that sinful baritone from the doorway and he turns, already feeling slightly less tense just for Sherlock standing in his doorway.

“Sorry?”

“A text came in after mine while you were onstage. One you weren’t happy to receive,” the taller man replies, leaning against the jamb and crossing his arms, looking entirely too delectable in his dark jeans and navy button down shirt.

“How’d you – ? Oh, course. Silly me,” John replies, soft sarcasm winning out over any real bite.

“It’s none of my business,” Sherlock quickly replies, turning to leave, but John’s hand on his arm stops his departure.
“It was Mary,” he blurts out. “Mary texted me.”

Sherlock’s face goes stone and he betrays nothing beyond his naturally cool countenance. John knows better though.

“Hey, if this is going to work, this partnership, then I need to be honest with you. I need to tell you things like this. Yeah?”

“You really don’t.”

“I really do.”

It takes him a long moment to realize he’s left his hand on Sherlock’s arm, the warmth of his skin searing itself onto John’s palm. A thousand unspoken things pass between them, potentials and promises that might never reach the open air. But just as John begins to think he might crumble under the power of those cerulean eyes, Sherlock blinks and gives a short, sharp nod.

John releases his elbow as he releases his breath, shaking himself from whatever it is that has him feeling slightly lightheaded and more than a bit wrong-footed.

“Mary wants to have dinner with me,” he says by way of explanation once his voice decides to return. “Catch up or something. I never did see her after her show and probably owe her at least a meal.”

“Of course,” Sherlock replies.

“That’s all,” John confirms.

“John, you don’t need to justify seeing your ex to me.”

John blinks at him, feeling such an innate fondness that he can’t help but cup the other man’s cheek.

“Yes, I do.”

A knock sounds, breaking whatever moment had formed, and Sarah pops her head in a good three seconds later, as if giving them time to finish whatever it was that had started. Their cast and crew are entirely too intuitive. Or perhaps he and Sherlock are just that obvious.

“Boys, one last thing: wedding rings!” She opens her palm to show two gleaming bands of gold. “Can’t believe I nearly forgot. Just try them on really quickly to see if they fit and, if so, we’ll keep them with your costumes.”

Neither man moves at first, but then John clears his throat and takes the ring that looks slightly larger. It slides over his knuckle with barely a hitch and he admires it in the low light of the room.

“Not bad, Miss Sawyer.”

“Excellent. And you, Mr. Holmes?”

“Yes,” he replies, stuttering over his words a bit as he holds his own hand up to the light. “This will do.”

And John will deny the fluttering feeling he gets in his stomach at the sight of a ring on Sherlock’s fourth finger. He’ll deny it until the day he dies.

Or until he puts his own on there.
Mary watches her breath fog in front of her face in the bitter March air that occasionally whips down 44th Street. She’s always liked the St. James, though she’s never gotten a chance to play it. It’s elegant and yet cozy, nestled in the middle of the busy block as if minding its own business.

It’s just barely 5:30pm, and yet the pre-show dinner crowd is beginning to gather at the surrounding restaurants, the early birds guaranteeing a leisurely meal before their 8pm curtain.

Eventually, the clock strikes 5:35pm and the stage door to her left promptly opens, letting forth a gaggle of actors, none of whom are quite the height or coloring of the man she’s looking for. A few she’s worked with – Ian Clarke, George Unwin, and Sean Fagan – the latter of whom is not exactly her biggest fan, and she hides her face in her scarf until they’ve gone.

“Hey,” a voice says to her left and she jumps to find John standing beside her, as if he’s appeared out of thin air.

“Hi.”

“I’m sorry to make you wait in the cold. I could have met you in the restaurant,” he says, eyes skimming her no doubt blue extremities, and he’s right – they’re literally only going three doors down.

“Nah, it’s fine,” she replies with a shrug stiff from the temperature. “I was people watching.”

He gives her that half smile that she loves so much, that tugs at just the side of his mouth revealing nothing about what he’s actually thinking and yet making him look incredibly soft and boyish. She wonders when she started memorizing quirks like that.

“Shall we?” he asks after a moment and she nods, following him down the block to the bistro where they spent many an evening. Indeed, even the hostess’ eyebrows kick up at their arrival – together – and Mary barely suppresses a groan. Someone keeps up on Broadway gossip then.

Though, it wasn’t gossip, was it? Hearsay isn’t hearsay if it’s supported by cold, hard fact.

She’s so lost in her thoughts that she doesn’t realize John is halfway to the table the hostess is leading them to. She catches up quickly and takes the menu that’s on offer before shrugging out her coat (with John’s help) and sitting down on the chair facing the room.

“How’ve you been?” she asks once they’re settled, the realization that they really haven’t said anything since the sidewalk awkwardly hanging in the air.

“Yeah, good. Good,” John nods, flicking his eyes up to her briefly for a small smile before finding his menu once again.

She barely suppresses a scoff. They’ve had this menu memorized for ages.

“Show going well?”

“Yeah, you know, trucking along.” He smiles and takes a sip of his water. “Thanks for the Streetcar tickets, by the way. You were excellent.”

And something warms within her because she knows his sincerity by now. She’s seen him bullshit
his way through multiple conversations about shows he’s hated before. “Thanks very much. That means a lot coming from you.”

He ducks his head and they’re both saved from further conversation when the waiter comes to take their order.

“How’s Sherlock?” she asks when the waiter leaves and John’s head snaps up as if she’d just insulted his sister. Which, come to think of it, she has.

“He’s, uh, he’s fine. Good. Great in the role.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Okay to take a backseat for once?”

His eyes narrow yet that damn smile remains on his face. “It was his idea.”

And that does catch her off-guard. Sherlock Holmes is not exactly known for his altruism. But there’s something else there; something else in John’s expression when she mentions his castmate. It’s an undercurrent of… what? Protectiveness? Fondness?

“And you’re getting along?”

“Yeah,” he replies in a tone that says ‘Why wouldn’t we be?’

“It’s just that his reputation isn’t exactly –”

“I’m aware of his reputation,” John snaps and it’s so fierce that she nearly drops her fork.

Oh yes, there it is. That look. It is protective and it is fond. But it goes deeper than that. Deep enough that Mary is too afraid to go digging.

“Right,” she says after a stunned moment, rearranging her cutlery and taking a careful sip of her water. “I think I’ll have the salmon. How about you?”

Molly is balancing a tray of coffees in one hand and a bag of scones in the other as she teeters her way down 44th St from 9th Avenue, slowing at the sight of a familiar silhouette hovering on the sidewalk.

“Sherlock?”

The man jumps and spins, looking quite like a boy with his hand stuck in the cookie jar.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Um…”

And now she’s truly worried. She’d reach out and feel his forehead for a fever if she had a hand to do so. She glances to her right wondering if there’s a ledge to place the bag down on when something through the window catches her eye. It’s John and… Mary? Having dinner?

Her gaze returns to Sherlock and he knows she’s realized just what exactly he’s doing sulking on the sidewalk by the way his eyes refuse to leave his shoes. Even his ears have turned a delightful shade of pink.

“Oh boy,” she murmurs. “Come on.”
“But – ”

“No,” she insists. “John will not appreciate you spying on him, now get.” She uses the tip of her shoe to nudge the back of his calf in the direction of the theatre and he goes rather unwillingly, practically stomping down the sidewalk like a petulant child. “Don’t make me call Irene,” she threatens and Sherlock rounds on her.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I might.”

“Ugh, she’d never let me hear the end of it.”

“Then inside with you and no calls need to be made.”

They make it to the stage door and Sherlock rings the bell. Fred, one of their many hulking security guards, gives them a muffled “hello” over the intercom before the door buzzes open. They make their way down the hall that leads backstage in silence with Molly darting her gaze to the man beside her every few seconds as if to make sure he’s not going to do a bunk.

Fred places a kiss on Molly’s blushing cheek as she drops the extra coffee off on his desk, and Sherlock continues to the stairs leading to the dressing rooms, leaving Molly to hurry after. She’s not entirely sure why she’s following him or if, indeed, he actually wants to be followed. But she’ll continue to do so until he either orders her to go or slams a door in her face. Which is why she holds her breath when they get to the room bearing his name, but Sherlock Holmes surprises her once again. He opens the door and steps back, allowing her to enter first.

She does so with a quiet “Thank you,” as she places her coffee and the bag of scones on the low table occupying the center of the small, sparse room. “Love what you’ve done with the place,” she teases as she shrugs out of her coat and sits on the tiny loveseat.

He makes a noncommittal noise as he sits on the chair at his station, glancing at himself in the mirror for a moment before turning away in disgust. As if what he found staring back was not up to snuff, a notion that Molly finds absolutely preposterous. She would be the first to vouch for the beauty of the man before her. Well, not first. Perhaps second. Behind John.

“Have you eaten?”

“What?” he asks, abruptly spinning around as if he forgot she was there for a moment.

“Have you eaten anything? It’s your dinner break and we’ve got another four hours of work to go.”

“I’m fine,” he mutters, but she shoves the bag of scones at him anyway.

“Take one. Fresh out of the oven,” she coaxes and he looks at her disbelievingly. “The baker’s boy likes me.”

He stares at the bag like it might blow up in his face, but then he reaches in and pulls a blueberry scone from the depths.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she tries, immediately hating how trite that sounds.

And if his tone is anything to go by, Sherlock must agree. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

She snorts. “We both know that’s not true.”
Sherlock looks at her incredulously and, wow, where did that gumption come from? Molly’s always been the meek one hiding behind Greg. Not the one calling it like she sees it. But then again, when something is as obvious as what’s between Sherlock and John, well, it’s just natural to want to shove the two of them together, isn’t it?

Sherlock is staring at his scone like he’s never quite seen a baked good of that nature.

“It’s not poisonous,” Molly says and Sherlock hesitantly takes a small bite.

“That’s actually quite good,” he murmurs after a moment, mouth full, and Molly laughs.

“Told you.”

Sherlock glances at her ever so briefly, before his gaze darts back to the treat in his hand, and Molly doesn’t think he’s ever looked more like a lost little boy than he does in this moment. Greg occasionally talks about it: how Sherlock’s just a child in both the good and the bad ways. Sometimes, he wants to bundle him away and protect him from the world, and sometimes, he wants to put him in the world’s longest timeout.

“I don’t know how to do this,” is the quiet admission that leaves Sherlock’s mouth a moment later and Molly blinks as she tries to comprehend what exactly he’s talking about.

“What?”

“Be friends.”

Something aches within her, but outwardly, she does nothing but give a little shrug. “You seem to be doing a decent enough job at the moment.”

He looks at her then as if really seeing her for the first time. And perhaps he is. Meek little Molly Hooper actually has a voice.

His phone buzzes a second later and he practically launches himself across to scrabble for it, a soft smile crossing his face when he eventually reads the message.

And Molly wishes there was someone in the world who smiled that lovingly when she texted them, thoroughly ignoring the fact that it’s Greg’s face that flashes across her mind at the thought.

Sherlock grips the phone in his palm, hesitating for a moment, before reaching over and showing her the screen.

Well that was excruciating.

Are you back?

Her smile practically splits her face as she blinks up at him, wondering what on earth he’s still doing in his dressing room. “Well?”

“Well what?”

She huffs and stands, tugging him to his feet as she simultaneously shoves him towards the door.

“Is it normal for friends to manhandle each other like this?” he asks as his shoulder catches on the doorframe.

“In matters of the heart, yes, it most certainly is. Now,” she pulls his jacket off, hangs it on the hook,
and nods in the direction of John’s room. “go get him, tiger.”

The line is out the door, the ushers are scanning tickets, the actors are calm (mostly) and the bar is open (thank god).

Greg leans against the staircase and watches the throngs stream into the theatre on this frigid Thursday evening. His cast is ready and the design elements are cooperating, but it’ll be interesting regardless. Some last minute set fixtures had them scrapping that afternoon’s dress rehearsal. They did a photo call for press purposes, but this will be their first time in front of a paying audience. Who’ve sold the house out, no less.

He waves at some colleagues as they pass through the lobby, and he’s reminded that first previews are hardly a barometer to gauge audience reaction. The house is papered, which ensures a friendly and hopefully vocal reaction.

Taking a sip from the plastic cup containing his gin and tonic, he allows himself a moment of guilt for drinking on a school night before coming to the conclusion that he’s definitely earned this.

“Please tell me that’s alcohol,” Irene mutters as she takes her place beside him and he holds the cup out.

“Want a whiff?”

“I want my own,” she replies, eyeing the growing line with despair.

“Hang on. Vodka soda, yeah?” he asks and she nods enthusiastically. “Oi, Jim,” he calls to the bartender and the young man looks up. “Vodka soda for the lady?”

Jim nods and has the drink ready in practically seconds.

“Bless you,” Irene murmurs as she takes her first sip, sinking back against the wall and looking a moment away from a panic attack. “Are they ready?” she asks after a quiet minute, and Greg surveys the crowd, if only to keep from answering.

But when he does reply, it’s calm, steady, and most of all, true.

“I think they’re so ready, this audience doesn’t know what it’s in for.”

It’s 7:43 and John’s inhaling shakily as he does up his final buttons, taking a long look in the mirror to see if he passes muster. And actually, he doesn’t look half bad. There’s a first time for everything.

His phones buzzes and it can be only one of three people. Harry, Mike, or Sherlock. And since Mike is already in his seat and has already texted him, and Sherlock is just down the hall, it must be Harry by process of elimination. And sure enough, only little sisters can perfect that particular brand of angry love:

I can’t believe you’ve banished me until opening. Break so many legs, kiddo. xx

And he laughs because even though he’s older, she insists on calling him ‘kiddo.’ Just one of the
many quirks of their relationship.

Ta very much, you lunatic. x he replies, laughing when she immediately responds with a fist-punching emoji. Having your agent at the first performance is par for the course. It’s part of his job. It’s why he gets paid. And though John respects and seeks Mike’s opinion, he’s not ashamed to fall a bit on his face in front of the man. He has, after all, seen him at some of his very lowest points. But Harry – he wants to be the big brother she placed on that pedestal so long ago. And if that means keeping her at bay until he can guarantee her the best he can put on offer, then so be it.

He fastens his belt around his waist, trying not to knock his sword into anything breakable in his small dressing room. He’ll wait until the last moment to put his leather military jacket on, not needing any more warmth at the moment. The stage lights are about to give him plenty.

He’s just retying a stubborn lace on his boot when the door creaks open and Sherlock’s head pokes around.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” John replies, standing once more. And Jesus, he’s seen the man in his costume before but it will never cease to completely knock the air from his lungs.

“You look… good,” Sherlock offers, shuffling a bit hesitantly in the doorway and John can’t help but smile.

“You look good, too.”

“How’s the stage fright?”

The reminder causes John’s breathing to stutter in his chest. “Um, manageable. For the moment.”

“Good.” Sherlock continues to stand there, utterly oblivious to the hustle and bustle happening just outside the door. “Friends tell each other things, yes?”

And it’s such an unexpected question that John can only stare and quirk an eyebrow. “Usually.”

“But important things. Deep things. Things no one else knows.” Sherlock digs the toe of his shoe into the carpet and John watches with more than growing concern. Where did this unsure creature come from?

“Sometimes,” he replies carefully.

“I know your secret – perhaps one of your deepest secrets – simply because I deduced it. Which… I’ll admit, was not exactly fair of me. I didn’t ask for information on Afghanistan and I had no right to it.”

“Sherlock –”

“No, please. Let me finish.” He moves a bit further into the room and John leans back in his chair, if only to clearly see his face. “If you look at my body of work, you’ll notice a distinct gap between projects approximately four years ago, when I, arguably, should have been at the height of my career.”

And John remembers reading that. Remembers taking note that Sherlock did Twelfth Night in fall of 2010 and didn’t have another credit until As You Like It in spring of 2012. Both were directed by Greg, and though it seemed odd at the time of reading, John didn’t dwell. Actors take hiatuses. But
where this newfound urge towards honesty is coming from, he’ll never know.

“Sherlock, you really don’t have to – ”

“I was in rehab,” Sherlock states as if he’s just pointed out that the sky is blue.

John’s heart kicks into gear and it feels as though the floor has dropped out from beneath him.

“What?” he asks quietly.

“I was in rehab. Four years ago, Moriarty dismantled me with deception and fiction, and I – I needed to make it go away. Make the pain disappear. Numb myself. I figured cocaine was as good as any place to start.”

“Sherlock…” he doesn’t know what to say beyond the man’s name. In fact, he’s quite sure those two syllables could sustain him for all the rest of his days, but now, in this charged moment, he needs to think of something else. Irene’s words regarding Moriarty from that drink so long ago come back to mind, haunting him with a significance his idiot brain didn’t catch at the time.

“It cost him more jobs than I care to count. And put him on the path to darker things.”

“Moriarty is probably going to break the news sooner or later and I’d rather you hear it from me,” Sherlock continues with a hitch in his breath, no doubt taking John’s silence for disappointment. Or worse: dismissive judgment.

“Fuck Moriarty,” he replies before he even realizes the words are coming out of his mouth. “Fuck him. You and I are going to go out on that stage tonight and give the finest fucking performance of Macbeth Broadway has ever seen. And no hack, no absolute nutter, can take that away from us.” He’s filled with a righteous fury and a burning contempt for the man that dared treat Sherlock less than the spectacular human being he is. He cups Sherlock’s face in his hands, pulling him close and not caring in the slightest how this might look to a passerby. “You are my partner. My equal. And I cannot do this without you.” He rubs his thumbs under Sherlock’s wide, shocked eyes. “I don’t care what happened four years ago. I care that you’re with me. Tonight and every night after. Can you do that?”

Sherlock blinks owlishly for a moment before grabbing hold of John’s wrists and pressing their foreheads together. “You fascinate me,” he breathes. “And that is perhaps the highest compliment I can give another human being.”

“I know,” John quietly replies, leaning in and letting their lips ghost across one another. “Trust me, I know.”

Sherlock cups John’s jaw, eliminating the breath between them and pressing their lips together in the kind of desperation that only weeks of dancing around the subject can create.

“Ten minutes, gentlemen. This is your ten minute call,” Sally’s voice announces over the intercom, and Sherlock and John break apart so fast, John hits the back of his head on the door.

“Ow – ”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”
“Yes, I’m – ” And John makes the mistake of glancing up at Sherlock who’s looking at him with such concern that the words die in his throat. “Sherlock.”

The taller man makes a strangled noise and they’re back at it a moment later. John is trying and failing to suppress a moan as Sherlock pushes him against the now-closed door, fingers tangling in the collar at his neck as Sherlock noses along his throat. Jesus.

Eventually, the heat calms to a simmering ember, both men panting fiercely into each other’s mouths. John lets his forehead rest against Sherlock’s chin, feeling as though his stomach has done a series of complicated somersaults worthy of the summer Olympics.

“We have a show to do,” he whispers and Sherlock chuckles, a deep rumble in his chest that has John placing his palm on the other man’s sternum.

“I don’t care,” is Sherlock’s breathless reply and John snorts.

“You will when your brain reboots.”

“I like where my brain is, thank you very much.”

John finally pulls away, gazing into the taller man’s eyes like he’s trying to memorize each infinitesimal fleck of color.

“This is – ”

“Overdue,” Sherlock interrupts and John smiles.

“Very much so.”

“But first, inconveniently, the Bard.”

John stifles his whimper when Sherlock lets go and steps back, attempting to adjust his clothing in the mirror even as the flush of a heated snog taints his oh-so-pale cheeks. John opens the door, because they’ll never get out of there if someone doesn’t do it, and stares at the beautiful man in front of him once more.

“We’ve got this.”

Sherlock smirks. “I never thought otherwise.”

xxxxxx

Sherlock watches from stage right as John charges after Sean into the wings on the opposite side, sword held high as he heads to his valiant and bloody death.

He wants to focus on the show, but he knows what John Watson’s lips taste like. Knows how warm his breath is when it ghosts across his jaw. Knows what the press of his tongue feels like as it seeks entrance into his mouth. And paying attention to the show is the absolute last thing on Sherlock’s mind.

John is standing on stage left, bent over with his hands braced on his knees as if catching his breath. And he probably is. The role is a beast, a draining behemoth of a character, who takes more than is usually put on offer. Sherlock does not envy him. And as George, their Malcolm, says his final speech, John glances up, locking eyes with Sherlock and piercing him with every good thought, emotion, and feeling Sherlock once thought himself incapable of.
“We shall not spend a large expense of time
Before we reckon with your several loves,
And make us even with you. My thanes and kinsmen,
Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland
In such an honour named. What's more to do,
Which would be planted newly with the time,
As calling home our exiled friends abroad
That fled the snares of watchful tyranny;
Producing forth the cruel ministers
Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen,
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands
Took off her life; this, and what needful else
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace,
We will perform in measure, time and place:
So, thanks to all at once and to each one,
Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone.”

First preview houses are normally friendly due to the overabundance of family and close acquaintances making up its ranks, so he expects a healthy ovation, but tonight -

Tonight the applause is positively thunderous.

The ensemble take their bows as the rest of the cast falls into place, and finally, it’s Sherlock’s turn. He strides out from stage right, eyes glued on John still beaming from the dark of stage left, before turning to the house and squinting into the blinding lights. It’s hard to see, but he knows they’re on their feet and the whoops and cheers for him in particular are not something he’s used to hearing. Sure, he gets a healthy dose of acclaim, but never of this nature. He bows, feeling himself oddly (and horrifyingly) choked up, before falling in line with his fellow actors.

And then the crowd roars as John bounds downstage, still beautiful, still covered in fake blood, and still every bit his.

“Holy shit,” Sean murmurs next to him and he can’t help but concur, perhaps in not quite the same vernacular.

John bows and holds his hands out as the ensemble step down to flank him on either side. Sherlock breathes easy once more when his left hand tightly grips John’s right, and John runs his thumb over Sherlock’s knuckle as if he knows exactly how overwhelmed the taller man feels at the moment.

They bow as one, and the crowd continues to stand and holler, so they bow again for good measure. John is the first to take a step back, letting go of George’s hand (but not Sherlock’s) as he waves, and the rest of the company take their cue from him. He is the king after all.

Some clap in return, thanking the house for being such great listeners, some wave, and some point to familiar faces they see cheering them on. But Sherlock can only grip John’s hand tighter as the shorter man tugs him upstage and off, out of sight from the prying eyes of their apparently adoring public.

Sherlock follows blindly – something he’s rapidly realizing he do even if John led him to the gates of hell – through the winding staircases and into John’s dressing room as the former army captain kicks the door shut. He’s practically brimming with barely contained energy and Sherlock daren’t move a muscle, as if facing down a spooked animal.

“Look,” John begins, roughly running his fingers through his blood-encrusted hair, “Denying
whatever this is, is quite possibly the dumbest thing I’ve ever done. And I’ve been to war.”

“I’ve been to rehab,” Sherlock offers, and John stops pacing, staring at him with something akin to awe. Then his slack features crease, as he breaks out into hysterical giggles, reaching for Sherlock’s lapels and pulling him in close once more.

“Are you in?” John whispers in his ear as he nips at his earlobe.

“All in.” is Sherlock’s raspy response.

“Does that mean you play poker?” John teases and Sherlock scoffs.

“Absolutely not.” He crashes against John once more, burying the other man’s grin in a flurry of soft lips and sharp teeth. “Take me home,” he breathes and the words are at once terrifying and exhilarating.

John’s grip tightens around Sherlock’s waist and he nips at his lip, hard enough to sting. “You sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“Okay,” John whispers. “Then get us a cab.”

It takes them a stealthy exit, several minutes, and one very handsy ride home before either realizes they’re still wearing their costumes.

Chapter End Notes

- 'Tech' is the process where all of the design elements (set, lighting, costumes, sound, makeup) come together. It's slow and tedious because it's the only opportunity to get everything right, but it can be fun.
- During tech, the director and the stage manager get what are lovingly called 'god mics' so they can be heard throughout the house.
- A 10/12 is literally a 'ten out of twelve.' Twelve hours of work with a two hour dinner break in the middle. They usually go from noon to midnight, with the break falling around 5 or 5:30pm.
- When working backstage, stage managers wear "blacks" - all black clothes so they can't be seen (much).
- Local 1 is the premiere stagehand union of IATSE - the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees.
- Actors get a dresser to help them in and out of their costumes. They are some of the hardest working people on Broadway, fixing any last minute costume issues and cleaning the clothes after every show.
- Angus' is a real bistro on 44th just down from the St. James Theatre. Great food and convenient location for pre-theatre. UPDATE: Angus’ closed in January 2016. Rent got too high. It's very sad.
- They really do give you adult sippy cups at the theatre so you don't spill your booze. And let me tell you, you have not lived until you've slurped wine through a straw like a three-year-old delinquent.
- Offering comp tickets is called "papering the house." This frequently happens during previews to ensure early word of mouth is good. Also press comes during previews the week before a show opens.
It Was the Nightingale, and Not the Lark

Chapter Summary

“Isn’t it customary for the two leads to attend the first preview party?” Irene asks, smirking as Greg rolls his eyes.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” he replies with a shrug and a wink, taking another sip of his drink. “They apparently didn’t even make it out of their costumes. Sarah’s livid.”

“I’m sure they’re out by now.”

Chapter Notes

Sexytimes, y’all. If that’s not your thing, read the first scene and then skip on down the page. xx

Also, this chapter was going to get us to Opening Night, but it just kept getting longer and longer so I decided to break it up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.
Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate tree.
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.”
- Romeo and Juliet, Act III Scene 5

Irene takes a sip from her full-to-the-brim martini, sauntering through the overly crowded restaurant and offering a smile to the jubilant men around her that happen to catch her eye. It’s claustrophobic, to be sure, but their utter enthusiasm is downright infectious. Irene feels practically giddy, for christ’s sake. And giddy is not a part of her emotional repertoire.

Young Jacob, a member of the ensemble, is already half in the bag, stumbling and slurring his way through a story, while Sean is shaking his head at him like a disappointed father as he orders another drink.

Irene chuckles as she bobs and weaves through the pulsing throngs, finally spotting Greg leaning against a quiet corner of the bar, nursing a healthy pour of scotch. She props her elbows up on the bar next to him and takes a quiet moment to survey the very unquiet room.

“Isn’t it customary for the two leads to attend the first preview party?” she asks, smirking as he rolls his eyes.
“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” he replies with a shrug and a wink, taking another sip of his drink. “They apparently didn’t even make it out of their costumes. Sarah’s livid.”

“I’m sure they’re out by now,” she drawls. “Is that why she’s ordering her third chardonnay?”

Greg nods and toasts his costume designer from afar when she catches their eye. “Pretty much.”

Molly appears a moment later, trying not to spill her cosmo as she totters on heels much higher than her ankles are accustomed to. “All right?”

Irene and Greg share a knowing smirk as they stare out over the joyful melee. “Right now? Yes,” Irene replies, taking another long sip of her martini. “Tomorrow? We’ll see.”

xxxxxx

They crash through the door in rather spectacular fashion and it’s only John’s hand on the back of Sherlock’s head that keeps him from acquiring a minor concussion.

“Watch the – ” John begins as Sherlock tumbles backwards onto the couch, “coffee table. Sorry.” He spares a moment to turn and shut the door, which is a moment too long in Sherlock’s opinion.

“It’s a well placed table, John. I should have been more aware.”

“Perhaps,” John smiles as he sidesteps the piece of furniture and stalks toward him like a predator advancing on its prey, quickly pressing him back into the couch as he carefully straddles his hips.

“Oh god,” Sherlock groans, amazed by the scientific processes that allow all of the blood in his head to redirect someplace distinctly more southern.

“Don’t come in your pants,” John murmurs, nipping at his ear. “Sarah’ll never forgive us.”

“I’m not going to come in my pants,” Sherlock breathlessly replies, but then John moves again and Sherlock’s hands grip his hips to pull him closer. “God, but it’s a near thing.” His hands dance around John’s trousers, hesitating only a moment, before gripping his arse and giving him a less than gentle squeeze. It’s worth it just to hear the groan that John breathes into his mouth.

“Jesus, Sherlock.”

“No quite,” he replies, letting his lips trail along John’s jaw before finding his pulse point and sucking hard. He needs to taste him, every fiber of him, immediately. He needs to catalogue the different noises he makes, and he needs to trace his freckles to map the constellations of his skin. “John.”

“Yeah?” John pants, fingers fumbling as he attempts to undo the small buttons on his silken shirt, before he stills and pulls away. “Sorry, are we – is this too fast?”

Sherlock lets loose a whine he’ll never admit to as he takes John’s face in his hands and pulls him back down to his lips. “Don’t talk nonsense.”

Truthfully, Sherlock isn’t sure what he expected when they escaped from the theatre with all the stealth of superspies before flagging down the nearest taxi and tumbling into the back seat. He had been prepared to let John lead, which so far he’d done a good job of doing, but then before their cab even turned onto 8th Avenue, he was whispering in his ear:

“I want to take this slow, but I also need you to touch me.”
“Where?”

“Christ Almighty, everywhere.”

And now there was such a frenzy of limbs and lips and licks that it’s a minor miracle they haven’t already ended up on the floor.

John’s shirt is off and Sherlock curses because he totally missed that happening, but he’s swift to catch up, stripping so quickly, he nearly sends a button or two flying. John gently takes his hand and slows him down, carefully undoing the final few fastenings before tugging the shirt from his shoulders.

“Sarah would’ve had your head and I’d quite prefer it as is, thank you very much,” he states, smiling softly. “And as much as I’d love to take you to pieces right here, I suggest we move to a cushion with more surface space.” He tucks a curl off Sherlock’s forehead and the move is so loving, so soft, that Sherlock (much to his horror) finds his throat closing up.

“Okay,” he manages, nodding his head to back up his nearly nonexistent words.

“Bedroom?” John asks.

“Bedroom.” Sherlock replies.

John climbs off of his lap much to Sherlock’s dismay, but he supposes it’s for the best considering he can barely walk on his own due to the constrictive nature of his trousers. He tries to map as much of the apartment as he can – he’s never been here before and his deductive powers want him to study every inch of the West Village flat, but his baser instincts have him stumbling to the bedroom as fast as his feet will carry him. He can inspect and mock John’s taste in books at a later date.

He grunts as his back hits the bed, propping himself up on his elbows in time to watch John advance on him, unbuttoning his flies as he goes. He giggles as he trips over his trousers and Sherlock can’t help but smile because he never expected something as momentous as this, as making love, to be as humorous as it is with John. And that alone makes the tension leave his limbs and the anxiety thundering in his chest abate a bit.

“All right?” John asks and Sherlock realizes he’s zoned out a bit.

“Never better,” he murmurs, reaching out and taking hold of John’s wrists, yanking the shorter man on top of him. He’s quickly coming to the realization that the feel of John’s skin against his own is more addicting than any dose of heroin.

“Easy, easy,” John laughs again. “I’ll end up accidentally kneeing you someplace really unfortunate.” His fingers dance over Sherlock’s ribcage, as if counting the bones protecting the breath in his lungs. “Budge up.”

He does, scooting back against the pillows as John looks down at him like he’s the prize at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box.

“How do you want to do this?” he asks after a moment, gaze darting over Sherlock’s body like a starving man faced with a feast and he doesn’t know where to start.

“I want to see you,” Sherlock replies. “We can experiment next time, but right now, I need to face you.”

“Okay, okay,” John nods and brushes Sherlock’s hair away from his face. “But… but who’s doing
“John, if you don’t get in me soon, I swear I will not be held accountable for my actions.”

John’s eyebrows hit his hairline, before he grabs a pillow and gently places it under Sherlock’s hips. “Well that answers that, then.”

“I should hope so,” Sherlock snaps, before latching onto John’s earlobe and drawing a long moan out of the smaller man.

“Christ, you should be illegal.”

“In some states, I am.”

“Cheeky.” The right corner of John’s mouth tugs up as he goes to work on Sherlock’s flies, and Sherlock takes the moment while John is distracted to study him. His tongue peaks out between his lips, forehead creased in quiet concentration. And Sherlock can’t help but reach out and gently trace the lines that mark John’s skin, smoothing them over until the older man is smiling softly down at him as he tugs Sherlock’s trousers and pants off his hips.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Sherlock murmurs, shocking himself by leaning towards the saccharine yet he means the words more than perhaps he’s ever meant anything. He doesn’t put much stock in fate, but he knows with every molecule in his body that John Watson was meant to come into his life. “I’ve been waiting a long while,” he finishes, kicking the pants off his ankles as he pulls John in for another soft kiss against his swollen lips, letting out a rather embarrassing groan as they’re pressed head to toe against each other for the first time.

“Likewise,” John breathes, gingerly parting Sherlock’s knees and settling in between then, before placing a kiss on the inside of his thigh and reaching blindly in the side table. Sherlock allows him to fumble for a moment before reaching up and running his fingers through John’s hair, brittle with dried stage blood. John shifts and Sherlock moans, hooking his ankles around John’s calves as the shorter man halts his search for what can only be lube and a condom in the side table.

“Do that again,” Sherlock commands and John is only too happy to oblige.

“Jesus, if I keep that up, this’ll be over far too soon,” the blonde grunts, pecking Sherlock on the collarbone and reaching once more for the lube, this time actually taking the time to look for it. Sherlock allows it only because it gets John back into his embrace that much quicker.

John drops a bottle next to Sherlock’s head on the pillow and returns to laving his neck, and Sherlock is on such sensory overload, he can’t focus on anything for longer than a moment. John, meanwhile is making his way down Sherlock’s chest, teeth closing around one nipple and then the other, pulling a gasp from deep within Sherlock’s throat. He can feel John’s smile against his skin as he reaches his belly button, drawing sounds out of Sherlock the usually reserved man didn’t think he was capable of.

“God, John,” he breathes as he hears the click of a cap, and he wants to tense because he knows what that sound means, but then John is licking a stripe up his cock and all thought, rational or otherwise, leaves his brain.

“I would like to take you apart and then put you back together,” the blonde murmurs, placing a kiss on his hip flexor before licking another, slower stripe up Sherlock’s rather eager prick. “If it’s all the same to you.”

Christ he didn’t know it could feel like this. He’s not a religious man, but he’s praying to every god
in the known history of the world to never, ever let this stop. And just when he thinks he needs to give John a warning that it’s too much too fast, the man’s finger traces a circle between his cheeks and all air stutters to a stop in his chest. And it’s that moment that John chooses to engulf the tip of his cock in his hot, wet mouth. To say Sherlock keens is an understatement.

“Holy Christ on a cross, John,” he rasps, gripping the pillow under his head so hard, he fears he’ll rip the fabric, but concern for John’s bedding is not high up on his list of priorities at the moment. Not when John’s finger is applying more pressure, easing into Sherlock’s body centimeter by glorious centimeter.

“Still with me?” John asks, lips wet, and it’s all the taller man can do to hold onto what little self-control he has left.

“Always,” he replies, barely aware of how soppy that sounds, but something in John’s face softens as he tilts his head and stares at him like Sherlock is the very center of his goddamn universe, and Sherlock has no idea how to respond to that other than grabbing the other man’s neck and crashing their lips together once more.

John makes a startled sound against him, finger slipping out of Sherlock, which pulls a whine from the taller man. “Okay, okay,” the blonde whispers, easing the finger back in as Sherlock’s head flops back onto pillow with a muffled thud.

“That’s… that’s…”

“Good?” John supplies and Sherlock shakes his head.

“The word for how this feels hasn’t been invented yet.”

John chuckles which turns into an aborted moan when his own aching cock brushes against Sherlock’s shin.

“Yes, more of that,” Sherlock murmurs. “I could listen to the sounds you make on loop like a symphony.”

“God, you’ve got to stop talking,” John groans. “Your voice alone could create the next sexual revolution.”

“Sorry,” he replies, not sorry in the slightest, but his teasing manner vanishes as he feels a second finger line up alongside the first.

“Still good?” Sherlock nods, but John shakes his head, placing a kiss on his bended knee. “No, no, don’t tense up on me. Relax,” he murmurs running his free hand in small circles on Sherlock’s stomach.

“Yes, I – ” but whatever he was about to say is held hostage in his throat when that second finger pushes in, and Sherlock’s hand grapples blindly for John’s, interlacing their fingers and holding tight as John gently works him open.


“I know. Trust me, I need you too, but I’ll do neither of us any good if I hurt you.”

Sherlock whines for the third time, which is three times more than he did as a child. But John did
promise to take him to pieces and, not for the first time that evening, Sherlock thinks he might actually follow through.

Somewhere along the course of things, a third finger makes his way into him. He’s panting and sweaty and trying not to focus on the fact that John is rutting against the mattress because if he does, he will come right here and now.

“For the love of god, John, I’m ready.”

“Okay,” John breathes and they’re quite possibly the most heavenly two syllables ever heard in the English language.

John removes his fingers (prompting Sherlock’s fourth whine of the night) and stuffs another pillow under his hips, before taking hold of his arse and tugging him closer. Sherlock can’t help but moan because even he can appreciate a decent show of dominance, watching hungrily as John rolls the condom on.

“Did you like that?” John teases, gripping his arse and kneading the muscles as Sherlock moans once again, wrapping his legs around John’s hips and urging him forward. “Patience is a virtue.”

“Fuck your patience.”

“Oh I intend to.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense – holy…” he trails off as John presses in, gripping the former-soldier’s shoulders so hard, surely his fingerprints will be branded upon his skin.

“All right?”

“Yes,” he replies, after a careful moment of measured breathing. “More.”

John nods and presses in further, and Sherlock does everything in his power to not close his eyes. He needs to watch this, remember it, play it back over and over until the most infinitesimal detail is his sharpest memory.

“Keep going, I’m fine,” he breathes when John pauses and the shorter man huffs out a laugh.

“Maybe I’m the one that needs a moment, you git. You’re…” he drops his head and inhales a shuddering breath, “god, you’re tight.” Sherlock grinds down and John’s jaw drops. “Stop, stop, or this ends right now.”

The brunette concedes, watching carefully as John squeezes his eyes shut and breathes through his nose, before pressing the rest of the way in and groaning when his balls press against Sherlock’s skin.

The feeling is… immense.

“John.” Sherlock gapes, mouth opening and closing because simple words can’t seem to do this moment justice, but then John gets a hand on his right thigh and hikes him further up his back. And Sherlock sees stars. “John!”

“There it is,” John murmurs, looking quite pleased with himself as he pulls out before gently thrusting back in.

They begin a steady rhythm, John holding Sherlock’s hand again and pressing it to the pillow by his
head as Sherlock raises his hips to meet him, seeking out that burst of pleasure that had his toes curling.


And John gets his arms under him and grunts as he sits back on his heels, pulling Sherlock with him and settling him on his lap. He thrusts shallowly and sparks dance behind Sherlock’s eyelids as he lets out a noise like he’s just been sucker-punched.

“That’s it,” John moans. “Oh god, that’s it.” He thrusts again and Sherlock’s head drops back, longer fingers digging into the taut muscles at John’s shoulders.

“Jesus, John. Oh god.” He digs his heels into the mattress, meeting John thrust for thrust. Every movement elicits a noise from both men, growing and growing in volume, until Sherlock is practically keening towards the ceiling as John grunts hotly against his shoulder.

“Oh – oh god, Sherlock, tell me you’re close.”

“I’m – ungh – nearly there.”

John leaves one hand sprawled against the small of Sherlock’s back to support him as his other slips between them, taking a hold of Sherlock’s cock for one stroke, then another, and then Sherlock is coming apart with such an intensity, he blacks out for a moment. The next thing he registers is John whispering, “Goddamn beautiful,” as he lays Sherlock back on the bed, before gripping his hips and pounding three deep thrusts into his over-stimulated body.

“Sher-lock,” he manages as his body seizes, filling the condom with hot cum Sherlock can actually feel. It makes his spent cock twitch slightly.

Once he finishes, John collapses but he braces himself on his forearms so as to not crush Sherlock. They’re sticky and sweaty and Sherlock already feels aches in muscles he didn’t know he had, but this is quite possibly the best evening of his life and he’d like it to go on forever if at all possible.

“Are you okay?” John asks, pulling away from the curve of Sherlock’s neck so he can look him in the eye.

Words are beyond him at the moment, but he manages a nod and a rather dazed smile. John moves to pull out but Sherlock hooks his ankles around his calves again, holding him in place.

“Not yet,” he whispers, carding his fingers through John’s sweaty hair and wishing there was a way to memorize the entire human body in a nanosecond. “Just... stay, for a moment.”

“Okay,” John murmurs, placing a kiss on Sherlock’s forehead before pressing a more heated one on his lips. “That was incredible.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock replies, watching John stare at him with something between worship and reconnaissance. They each smile at the same time, before gentle laughter bubbles up, shaking them both.

He’s not sure he’s ever felt this tired before. Sure, he’s experienced exhaustion on a bone-deep level when he’s pushed his body past its limits, but this is different. He’s earned this fatigue. He performed quite possibly the most amazing role he’s ever been given the chance to play (and he played it goddamned well), and he’s currently lying in John Watson’s bed. In John Watson’s arms.

Not bad going for Thursday evening, is the last thing he remembers thinking as John runs a warm,
wet flannel over his stomach, tucks the covers up to his chin, and whispers “Night, love,” into his ear.

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John blinks his eyes open, feeling that kind of deep-seated contentment that only comes after a great night’s sleep and a frankly spectacular shag. Oh –

He turns to the left, as if remembering just what exactly happened last night, to find Sherlock’s face buried in his chest, arm draped over John’s stomach and legs entwined so tightly, John isn’t sure which ones belong to whom.

He smiles softly, lifting his head up a bit to bury his nose in Sherlock’s hair, inhaling the scent of vanilla and something deeper – earthier. He himself must look a fright – he never did get completely out of his stage make up last night. His hair is a rather disgusting combination of product and dried stage blood, but at this moment, buried in blankets with an insanely gorgeous (and gorgeously insane) actor wrapped around him, John could not care less.

He runs the tip of his finger from Sherlock’s shoulder, down his arm, over his elbow to his wrist, which is lightly holding onto John’s ribcage. He huffs out a laugh (and swallows a pang) when he realizes they’re both still wearing their wedding rings. The band of gold winks in the early morning light streaming in through John’s window and he takes a moment to watch the shadows play across Sherlock’s face as he runs his finger over the gold band that’s cool against his skin.

Eventually, after spending more time than he’ll ever admit studying the man draped across him, John reaches for the phone on the table next to the bed, quite impressed that the device actually made it there relatively unscathed. The clock reads 8:54am and he winces as he opens up his texts, finding eleven unread messages and god knows how many emails.

Harry, at least, is oblivious, though he will have to answer for his radio silence eventually.

How’d it go?

That well, huh?

Oi! Answer me!

Molly’s is sweet:

Great job tonight!!

Greg’s begin relatively innocuously, but grow in their exasperation:

Where are you?

You’re missing some great sushi.

I know it doesn’t take this long to change out of your costumes.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Seriously?

I shouldn’t have to hear
from our SECURITY GUARD
that you’ve done a bunk.

But Irene’s… John didn’t think it was possible for two words to sound so downright boastful:

Called it.

Mike ends the night, sending one around three in the morning that simply reads:

You dog.

John rubs his eyes and drops the phone back on the table, deciding not to respond until he’s had at least a full mug of coffee. He does have the foresight to read Sally’s schedule for the day, so at least he knows that he and Sherlock aren’t called until 1pm, before pressing a feather light kiss to Sherlock’s head and extricating himself from the tangle of limbs and blankets.

He pulls on a t-shirt and pants, before padding into the living room, righting the knocked over coffee table and picking up the few scattered throw pillows with a rather sheepish smile. He didn’t quite realize just how… enthusiastic… he and Sherlock were when they tumbled through that door.

The tiled floor of the kitchen is cold on his bare feet and he sets the coffee pot to brew as he leans against the counter and catalogues the aches and pains of his body. They’re good aches and pains, though. The kind he certainly doesn’t mind having, and the thought makes something warm and fluttery ignite in his chest.

Sherlock is in his bed.

And John is making him coffee.

What a time to be alive.

He fills two mugs and tiptoes his way back to the bedroom, allowing himself a moment in the doorway to watch the man softly snoring amidst the pillows. He’s so pale, he nearly matches the sheets, which are riding low on his hip and giving John just a glimpse of the body he worshipped last night. He’d love nothing more than to ravish him all over again, but he knows how badly Sherlock needs sleep and he lets his more caring nature override his baser instincts. Placing the extra mug of coffee on the other side table, he bends down and places another soft kiss in Sherlock’s hair before making his way back over to his side of the bed and gently settling in with his iPad to flick through the headlines.

The smell of strong coffee and cinnamon must be enough to rouse Sherlock, and he blinks his eyes open a moment later, look adorably befuddled before his gaze lands on John. Then it’s sharp and keen and thoroughly aware of everything they did last night, which is why a naughty little smirk slides across his face a moment later.

“Morning, sunshine,” John murmurs, laughing as Sherlock groans and buries his face in John’s stomach.

“How much trouble are we in?” he asks after a moment, his breath hot through the t-shirt John pulled on as he cards his fingers through those tousled curls.

“Depends on your definition of trouble. Molly is nonplussed, Greg is exasperated, and Mike and Irene are probably trying to figure out who won the bet. Sarah, on the other hand…” he trails off and directs his gaze to the trail of clothes they left from the living room to the bedroom.
“Mm,” Sherlock grunts and John laughs before he sobers slightly, running his fingers from Sherlock’s hair down his neck.

“Hey. You feeling okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” is the muffled response and John gives a little shrug and kneads his fingers into the tight muscles of Sherlock’s shoulders.

“Well, I know the first time can be painful – ”

And Sherlock sits up so quickly, he nearly clocks John in the jaw. “Of course I’m okay. How could I be anything but? I was with you.”

“Sherlock – ” but the man silences his rebuttal with a kiss before reaching over and grabbing hold of the coffee mug John placed by his bedside.

“What time must we venture out into the real world again?”

“One o’clock.”

“Boring.”

“Necessary.” John smiles and takes another sip of his coffee before his stomach drops. “Actually, we might want to get there prior to 1pm. Lest Sarah cut off various appendages we’d really rather keep attached.”

“Agreed.” Sherlock nods studiously before perking up. “Breakfast?”

And John gapes like a fish. “You’re actually eating? Miracles do happen.”

“I worked up an appetite,” he says with a devilish glint in his eyes, and John laughs at the adorable man in front of him.

“There’s a great place around the corner. Best cappuccinos in the city. Though I haven’t the faintest clue what you’re going to wear.”

Sherlock frowns, as if he hadn’t realized he arrived here in leather trousers and a navy silk button down – which certainly wouldn’t be out of place for the West Village, but does seem a bit much for a Friday morning.

“I can give you one of my shirts, but you and I both know my trousers won’t cover your ankles.”

“Isn’t that the fashion these days?” Sherlock drawls.

“Not in March, it isn’t,” John replies.

But they needn’t have worried. For when John opened the door to grab the morning paper, he found a brown paper bag full of clothes with a note stapled to it in Irene’s familiar script:

I know. I’m just that good.

xxxxxx

Nate has been John’s dresser for the better part of seven years and never, not once, has he seen his personal life take such precedence over the work at hand. And frankly, he’s thrilled. John’s always been so focused, so professional, that his relationships might even have suffered for it. Mary certainly
didn’t appreciate the fact that she was always second fiddle, but then again, Nate was never her biggest fan, so he’s not exactly broken up about it.

Sherlock, however, Sherlock might just be worth it all. Nate’s always been a bit wary of him. He’s heard the rumors and chosen not to believe them, but he’s still a formidable force to be reckoned with. He seems to make John happy though. Or at least make him lose his mind in the pursuit.

Which is why Nate sends them a warning text around 11am, shortly after their costume designer bursts into John’s dressing room for the third time that morning demanding to know if her costumes have made an appearance.

**Sarah’s put a price on your head.**
**Enter theatre at own risk.**

Nate turns back to the ironing and feels his phone buzz a moment later:

***Shit. You gonna turn me in?***

**Never. Unless the money’s good.** he types back and John is quick in his reply:

***Wanker.***

***I’ve bribed Fred with beer.***
***He’ll give me a heads up when you get to the stage door.***

***I knew I liked you.***

Nate laughs and slides the phone back into his pocket, going about his business for another hour or so, when Fred’s booming voice echoes over the intercom.

***“Nate? Incoming.”***

Nate rolls his eyes and quickly folds up the ironing board before opening the door just in time for John and Sherlock to come tumbling into the small room.

***“Ta,” John breathes. “That was close.”***

***“What, did you sprint here?” Nate asks and Sherlock nods.***

***“Just about.”***

And he knows that’s not easy given the narrow hallways, and just when he’s about to demand John and Sherlock hand over their pilfered clothes, he hears heeled footsteps echoing off the cinderblock walls. He has just enough time to shove John and Sherlock behind the door before Sarah appears a moment later, hands on her hips and hair askew.

***“Incoming? What does ‘incoming’ mean?”***

Nate pushes the door harder against the wall, knowing he’s crushing his actors and not minding in the slightest. ***“I ordered a bunch of mini-muffins from Amy’s Bread. They’re probably here.”***

Sarah’s eyes narrow and he holds his breath until she actually deems him truthful. And he has no idea how he managed to pull that one off. She stalks off just as quickly as she came and laughter bursts out from behind the dressing room door.
Nate slams the door shut to reveal John and Sherlock nearly in tears, faces red as they lean against one another for support. It’s ridiculous and infuriating and Nate can’t help but laugh along with them.

“You owe me mini-muffins,” he says after a moment and John nods, barely able to form words as Sherlock buries his nose in his hair.

“I will buy you so many.”

“So many,” Sherlock emphasizes, before placing a hasty kiss on John’s lips and disappearing to his own dressing room. John stares at the floor, having issues hiding his smile and yet he seems too embarrassed to look anywhere but at the ground.

“I’m happy for you,” Nate says after a quiet moment, and John looks up, practically beaming. “I don’t think it was a role you’ve been searching for these last few years. I think it was him.”

And if John’s gaze gets a bit watery, Nate doesn’t say a thing.

“Now, come on. Hand over the costume. Do I need a hazmat suit for this?” John bursts out laughing as he digs the trousers and shirt out of the bag on his shoulder.

“No, I think it made it through unscathed.”

“Thank God for that. Or else I was going to throw in a bottle of Veuve Clicquot along with those mini-muffins.”

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The Marriage is Back On. And Then Some.
The Chill Has Certainly Thawed at the St. James Theatre.
By Michael Riedel

John Watson and Sherlock Holmes: An Item?

Sources tell me that the two leads sneaked out of the theatre where their production of Macbeth played its first performance on Thursday night, never quite making it to the after party. When I met the two of them at their press event at the end of last month, things felt decidedly strained between the actors, but perhaps there’s been a change of heart?

A source close to the production tells me, “It’s new. They’re not dating or anything, but something’s there. We can all see it.”

While Holmes has kept a relatively low profile since his personal life was made public in a rather colorful way a few years ago, Watson ended a highly publicized relationship with fellow Tony-nominee Mary Morstan, currently starring just around the corner in A Streetcar Named Desire. The two met when they did Anything Goes two seasons ago. Interesting that Morstan is starring with Holmes’ supposed one-time love, James Moriarty. His expose on Holmes nearly ended the latter’s career. It certainly had him licking his wounds.

Perhaps Holmes and Watson are finding comfort in one another, but only time will tell.

Macbeth is already shaping up to be a hot ticket. Perhaps in more ways than one.
It takes every ounce of Greg’s strength not to throw his phone across the theatre when he finishes reading the article. It’s not long, but then again, they never are. It’s like a wasp sting. It swoops in, leaves its mark, and makes a quick retreat.

“Get me Sherlock and John,” he murmurs to Molly, who’s been staring at him wide-eyed ever since the Google alert chimed on his phone. She nods and books it backstage, and he pinches the bridge of his nose before sighing and following. He shouldn’t do this in the house, in front of prying eyes and listening ears.

He wanders his way backstage, telling Clara to give Sally a heads up that he needs a minute and she nods before paging her PSM over the headset.

By the time he gets to the hall where their dressing rooms are located, Molly is talking in hushed tones with John, who’s leaning against his doorjamb looking like he’s aged a decade in the last ten minutes.

“John – ”

“I read it,” the actor interrupts, shoving his hands into his pockets if only to keep them from punching something. Greg can see him thrumming with energy from twenty paces away.

“Where’s Sherlock?”

“He was on the other side of the stage. They’re paging him,” Molly murmurs and Greg nods, gesturing to the dressing room behind John as they make their way inside.

John leans his hands on the table in front of the mirror, head hanging low as he clenches and unclenches his fists against the laminate worktop.

Greg isn’t an idiot. He knows what Sherlock and John got up to last night and, frankly, it’s about bloody time. But he also has a show to protect and that show includes its company of actors. Even the two idiots at the center of this whole nonsensical thing.

Sherlock bounds into the room a moment later and Greg’s stomach drops. He’s so light, so wide-eyed, lips breaking into a smile the moment his gaze falls on John. And Greg’s never seen Sherlock so happy. He hates that he has to make that smile falter even the slightest bit, which it does when he catches sight of the set of John’s shoulders.

“What’s going on? Who died?”

Molly wordlessly holds out her mobile and Sherlock’s eyes scan the contents.

“Goddammit,” he snaps, punching his hand into the doorjamb, yet handing Molly her phone back before he does any permanent damage to it.

John steps forward and gently takes Sherlock’s palm, rubbing his fingers over the already swelling knuckles. “You’ll need ice for that,” he murmurs, and before the words have finished leaving his mouth, Molly disappears out the door to make it happen.

Greg clears his throat and places his hands on his hips, feeling like an intruder on this intimate moment, yet knowing the words need to be said. “Look, we can’t let this take away from the show. It needs to stand on its own – ”

“I’m not giving him up,” Sherlock interrupts and Greg holds up his hands.
“I’m not asking you to.”

“Then why are you here?” he snaps and Greg just loses it.

“Because I care about you, Sherlock! Because this is the first time I’ve seen you take an interest in another human being! Because I was there the last time someone took you apart in the press, lest you forget. In fact, I was the only one there, so don’t you dare, not for one second, think that I am not behind you 100 percent. Do you hear me?”

He’s breathing heavily and the two people in front of him are staring at him wide-eyed, Sherlock more so, as he swallows thickly and slowly nods.

“Yes,” he whispers. “I hear you.”

“Good,” he replies, turning to address them both. “Now, this’ll be an uphill battle, but I think if we keep our heads down and do what we do best, we might just make it to opening night. Agreed?”

He watches as John slides his fingers through Sherlock’s, squeezing tight in a silent show of support.

“Agreed.”

“Good. But if you two end whatever this is because of shite like this article, I swear to god, I will fire you both.”

“On what grounds?” John asks, but he’s smiling and Greg quirks a grin.

“Stupidity.” He claps them both on the shoulders, before shoving them towards the door like an exasperated older brother. “Now get back to work. We have a Broadway show to put on.”

He thinks he hears a “yes, sir,” from John, but it’s Sherlock who surprises him most, uttering two words the man has waited ten years to hear.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

- Producers on a show usually host a first preview party. After notes are given (and they're given to the cast and crew after every preview performance, usually in the house) people gather at a nearby restaurant to toast the fact that they're still alive.
- Amy's Bread is real. 9th Avenue between 46th and 47th. Best cakes and cinnamon buns in the city. Hands down.
"Mike and Irene think it'll help," he tries and John laughs humorlessly.

"Will it? Will the stories stop? Will the show be better for it?"

Sherlock shrugs and the gesture must be so foreign on his shoulders that John sharply glances at him. "I don't know, John."

So, this is only part one of Opening because the damn thing got away from me. Again. Womp womp. And oh hey! We have a chapter count!*

*subject to change depending on author's (in)ability to accurately gauge plot devices.

"In the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. Go, make you ready."

- Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2

John smiles down at Sherlock’s sleeping form, sprawled out across the bed in no manner of delicacy. The minute John sneaked out to use the loo, the taller man had immediately drifted diagonally and absconded with all of the pillows, but losing his place in bed is something John is willing to contend with if it means falling asleep with that beautiful man wrapped around him.

He pads into the kitchen with a smile still tugging at his lips, makes some coffee, and pours it into a travel mug, stealing a scalding sip before heading to brush his teeth.

It’s Saturday morning, three days before opening, and John has never felt more excited/terrified in his life.

He spits out his toothpaste and blows a deep breath out, sparing another glance for the legs he can see tangled up in his sheets through the bedroom door. He pauses, just watching the curves of those limbs create mountains and valleys beneath the covers, and smiles with an overly fond expression as he exits the apartment.

Sherlock’s doorman, Orlando, gives him a knowing smile as John exits the lift and enters the lobby, and John manages a sheepish “Morning,” as Orlando winks and opens the door into the cool April air. It’s cold for this time of year and the sun hasn’t quite crested over the buildings of the east side, making the park dark, nippy, and just a little bit poetic.
John crunches over dead leaves as he makes his way past the occasional jogger or dog-walker, winding his way through the paths that cut through grass and rock. Eventually he makes his way to Strawberry Fields, named for John Lennon and located just across from his former apartment building, The Dakota. Taking a moment to appreciate the “Imagine” tiled mosaic in the middle of the sidewalk, he takes a seat on a bench and watches with amusement as Mike bounces on his toes as he sips at his Anthora coffee cup, cursing John from a distance. John watches the other man shift his weight in the cold, before taking pity on him and whistling to draw his attention.

Mike jumps and glares, making his way over to John’s bench and plopping down next to him.

John nudges him and takes a sip from his mug. “And how was the Motherland?”

“A bloody exhausting 72 hours,” he mutters. Mike had to return to London to fix a dustup one of his other clients had gotten himself into – something involving a trowel, a goat, and rather a lot of alcohol. John figured he was better off not knowing the specifics. “Why the hell did we have to meet here? I’m freezing my bollocks off.”

“It’s picturesque.”

“It’s deplorable.”

John digs the toe of his boot into the frozen ground and manages a bashful smile. “It’s also closer to Sherlock’s apartment.”

“And there it is,” Mike teases with a smile, which makes John’s ears go pink. “I’m shocked he let you out.”

And at this, John snorts. “He didn’t. He’s hiding behind the tree over there.”

“Are you ser – ?”

“No, don’t look!”

Mike’s head snaps forward ahead and John just catches Sherlock duck back behind the tree before he giggles into his coffee cup.

“You’re besotted, you are,” Mike says quietly after a moment, and only then does John realize he’s been the subject of his agent’s scrutiny.

“Yeah, a bit.” But he doesn’t want to talk about Sherlock now. Even though Mike’s been able to read him like a book since they were kids. “Rumor has it the Times was in the audience last night,” he says, steering the conversation back to work.

“Good thing it was a great show, then.”

“And how would you know? You were somewhere over the Atlantic.”

“I have my spies,” Mike replies and John chuckles.

“Of course you do.” The teasing is all in good fun, but John knows this isn’t a casual catch up. Mike wouldn’t insist they meet before 9am the day after he flew between countries if it wasn’t important.

Which is why he’s not at all surprised when Mike sobers a moment later, hesitatingly pulling his phone out of his pocket and clearing his throat, looking everywhere but at John.

“You should be the first to see it.”
And immediately, John’s stomach plummets. “See what?”

Mike wordlessly hands his phone over and John’s eyes scan the article though he needn’t have gone past the headline:

**A Return to Rehab for Sherlock Holmes?**

_The actor was spotted enjoying a cocktail with agent Irene Adler on Thursday evening after a performance of Macbeth. The actor had been admitted to Castle Craig in Scotland back in 2011 for substance abuse._

John ignores the rest of the article as nausea roils in his stomach.

“How did they know?” His voice is low and not at all his own.

“Someone saw him out – ”

“No! How did they _know_? No one knows about his stint in rehab save for Mycroft, Irene, me, and now you. This required digging and no doubt a lot of illegalities. Christ, they even have the name of the bloody center!”

Mike sighs and takes his phone back before John can crush it in his hand.

“John, you know where this is coming from,” he quietly replies and John swallows hard, biting back vicious obscenities, because yes, he does.

Goddamn fucking James Moriarty.

John pinches the bridge of his nose and registers movement in the distance to his right. Sensing something must be wrong, Sherlock is no longer hiding behind the tree, but John can’t look at him at the moment. If he looks, then Sherlock will know he failed him. John promised himself he’d protect that man from anything and everything, but here it is: his darkest secret laid bare for the world.

“I don’t know what to do,” he quietly admits and those six words crush him under the weight of their judgment.

“We need some good press out there, but we need to make it look like we’re not responding specifically to this. We can’t feed the fire.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

Mike pulls a video camera out of his bag and hands it to John who stares blankly at him for a moment. “Broadway.com still wants that video blog. _Show_ them Sherlock Holmes is not the man James Moriarty would like him to be.”

John numbly takes the camera and turns it over in his hands. “You can’t put the fate of Sherlock’s career on a video.”

“I’m not putting his fate on a video, I’m putting it on you.” Mike’s hand comes down on his shoulder and squeezes. “John Watson, you are the most talented bastard I’ve ever had the honor of working with. And you could charm your way out of a guilty verdict. If Irene thought I was putting her only client in less capable hands, we wouldn’t be here right now. Putting his fate on you is the best place it can be.”

“Mike…” he trails off because this is quite a burden to bear, but his agent doesn’t let go of him until John meets his steady gaze. “Fine. Okay.”
“Good. We’ll get through this. The only thing I need you to focus on is opening that show.”

“And going on a charming offensive to divert attention,” John mutters and Mike chuckles.

“That too.”

John is grateful to his agent, he really is. He’s gotten him out of plenty of tight scrapes before, but this is more important because this isn’t John, it’s Sherlock. And nothing is more important than Sherlock.

The man himself is still lurking halfway behind the tree, all pretense of espionage forgotten for the moment as John looks up and meets his eyes. He can see Sherlock inhale and square his shoulders, already bracing for the news John is about to give him. The lovable genius can probably deduce it from fifty paces away.

Mike squeezes his shoulder again and offers the man in the distance a tight smile and a nod, before heading for the nearest entrance to the park.

John pockets the camera and inhales deeply, meeting Sherlock’s eyes once more.

“Into battle.”

xxxxxx

[The camera frame wobbles to life in the hand of a shaky first-timer, swinging around until John Watson is sort of framed in the center. Or as framed as it can be while holding it oneself.]

John: Uh, hi, I’m John Watson. [Gives a little wave] I’ll be doing a blog for Broadway.com, or a vlog, as they’re calling it these days. [Shakes his head] The words you kids come up with. It’s Saturday, which means a two-show day for us. A matinee at 2pm and an evening show at 8pm. It’s about [looks at watch], crikey, nearly eleven, which means I’ve got to go.

[He lifts his eyebrows and reaches forward to click the camera off.]

[It comes to life later as he walks down the street.]

John: Let me tell you, there is nothing more insane than midtown on a beautiful Saturday afternoon.

[The camera shakes as he winds his way through the throngs.]

John: A two-show day can be pretty exhausting, so I’m off to get a smoothie and a coffee. [He looks into the camera] That’s right, just because I’m English, it doesn’t mean I drink tea all the time. Just most of the time.

[Forty-fourth St. passes by, a few tourists glance at the camera curiously, before the frame settles on a gold plaque labeled “Stage Door.”]

John: And this, helpfully enough, is our stage door. [His hand comes into shot and opens the door, leading to a dark hallway] This hall is to the right of the theatre, so the seats are just on the other side of this wall and the stage… [the camera pans through a doorway and to the left showing the dark stage with a lone light] is right here. That light there is called a ‘ghost light.’ [Camera swings around and just his eyes come into frame] Keeps the demons away. So they say.

Sean, in the distance: No it doesn’t!

John: Shut up, Sean!
John: This is Fred, our security guard. Say hi to Broadway.com, Fred.

Fred: Hi, Broadway.com.

John: The dressing rooms are up here. Lots of stairs, lots of exercise. And this [his hand gestures to the large board full of papers and fliers] is where we sign in. So they know where we are at all times. Nosy, really.

Sherlock [off camera]: What are you doing?

John: Oh good. Here hold this.

Sherlock: Why would I hold that?

John: So you can get a shot of me signing in.

Sherlock: Why?

John: Because these things always have shots of people signing in.

Sherlock: Ooh, here we have the genus importantorus actorus in its natural habitat.

John: Ha bloody ha. [He grabs the camera back, swinging it around on a surprised Sherlock.] And here we have Sherlock Holmes, incredibly talented yet self-important git.

[Sherlock clutches his hand over his chest]

Sherlock: You wound me.

John: Hardly.

[Sherlock reaches for the camera.]

John: Don't you dare!

[The screen goes black]

[The camera comes back, pointing at the mirror in John's room as he finishes putting the final touches on his costume.]

John: It's about 1:35pm, so we've got about twenty-five minutes until show time. [distant bangs and yelling]. You can tell how close we are by the backstage activity. Uh, anyway, this is my costume [stands and turns, showing off the leather trousers and shirt]. It's unbelievably hot under those lights, so this will be pretty disgusting by the end of the show. [Nate enters and hangs John's jacket on his costume rack]. This is my dresser, Nate. Nate, say hi. [Nate waves, mouth full of pins.] Nate makes sure I don't make an arse out of myself by going onstage with my flies unzipped or something. It's also his unfortunate task to wash this costume at the end of every show. [Nate nods emphatically and exits]. For which I'm very grateful! [John chuckles and turns back towards the camera.] All that's left for me are some vocal warm-ups, which you don't need to hear. Ta.
[He reaches forward and shuts the camera off.]

[Camera comes back on. John looks distinctly sweater, dirtier, and more exhausted than he did three hours ago.]

John: Well that's one show down. What's one more? Right now, though, it's dinner.

[There's a banging on the door.]

Sherlock: [off camera] Sushi or Thai?

John: Sushi!

Sherlock: Be ready in five minutes.

[John laughs and shakes his head.]

John: Yes, he's always like that.

[Camera goes dark. Comes back on as Sherlock walks ahead of John across 8th Avenue]

Sherlock: Hurry up, John.

John: Oi, some of us have shorter legs than others! [Points camera to his face] You see what I have to put up with?

[Sean pops into frame over John's shoulder.]

Sean: And he likes John. Imagine what it's like for the rest of us poor bastards.

John: Language! Kids see this!

Sean: Sorry, kids. Oh shit, cab!

[The camera faces the ground as a loud car honks and laughter is heard]

Sherlock: John, please don't die!

Sean: Hey! What about me?

[More laughter, the camera eventually goes dark.]

[The camera comes back on. Sherlock's voice is heard echoing in a darkened theatre]

Sherlock: Hello, this is Sherlock Holmes. I've confiscated John's camera. He lost his privileges after sticking it in my face one too many times. So we're going on a little tour while he gets physical therapy done because acting is a rough and dangerous business. Currently, we are in the St. James Theatre on 44th St. between Broadway and 8th Avenue in the great, but ultimately inferior, city of New York. It was built by Abraham L. Erlanger and opened in 1927 as The Erlanger. [he scoffs] Someone had an ego. [camera swings around to take in the empty stage with the dark, cavernous set] Erlanger died in 1930 and control of the venue was taken over by the Astor family. Hopefully you know who the Astor family is. If not, you're an idiot. Anyway, we have the Astors to thank for naming it the St. James. [The camera bounces as he walks backwards, eventually banging through the doors into the lobby]. The theatre was taken over by the Shuberts in 1941. The Shuberts currently own the most theatres on Broadway. But back in 1957, they were forced to sell it to someone named William L McKnight who eventually gave it to his daughter, Virginia, and her
husband James H. Binger. Binger formed Jujamcyn Theaters, the theatrical production company that still runs it today. In fact, their offices are just upstairs. And the rather odd name is derived from Binger's grandchildren: Judith, James, and Cynthia. Ju-Jam-Cyn. [he huffs loudly.] Sentiment.

[The camera swings around to show the empty bar and merchandise booth.]

Sherlock: And this is where we hock our wares. Even classical theatre can't escape commercialism.

John: [off camera] Sherlock! What on earth are you doing?

[The camera fumbles for a bit before John comes into frame, hands on his hips.]

Sherlock: You were busy. I gave them a history lesson.

John: Christ. [His hand covers the lens.]

Sherlock: I was a complete gentleman!

[The video cuts out.]

[The camera comes to life, slowly circling around a cozy apartment.]

John: So this is my flat. It has all of the amenities: hot water, electricity, telly, really comfy couch. [The camera stops turning and turns on John as he sits on the plush leather] It is Monday, April 20th, at 9:07 in the evening, and the curtain rises on opening night in approximately 21 hours and 23 minutes. That gives me 21 hours and 22 minutes to get over the nerves currently making my insides form the most spectacular of contortions. So, uh, that's it for my video blog. This time anyway. I hope it's been fun and at least somewhat educational. Bye.

[The camera goes dark.]

xxxxxx

Sherlock waits until he sees the red light on the camera switch off before coming out of the kitchen and bending down to place a kiss on John's head.

"Very educational."

"Shut up," John mutters and Sherlock smiles, taking a seat next to him on the couch.

"Come on. It wasn't that bad. And that's saying something coming from me. I deplore everything."

John lifts his head from his hands and runs his fingers through his hair. "I hate hiding this. I hate that you have to time your trips to the fridge when I'm filming. I hate that you feel like you have to stay in the kitchen until I'm done. I just – I'm tired."

Sherlock has never seen John look so dejected before and, for the first time, he's truly at a loss on how to comfort the man.

"Mike and Irene think it'll help," he tries and John laughs humorlessly.

"Will it? Will the stories stop? Will the show be better for it?"

Sherlock shrugs and the gesture must be so foreign on his shoulders that John sharply glances at him. "I don't know, John," he finally admits.
And he doesn't.

John's always been the comforter, the healer, the constant. Sherlock is the unreliable one. The impatient one, the unpredictable one. But here, with John's forever-stoic composure cracking at the seams, Sherlock truly wonders if it's worth it. He knows it is, but what if the toll it's taking on John is just too great?

"We don't have to do this, you know. If it's too much."

John makes a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob and shakes his head, the levity of his tone belying the strength behind his words.

"If you ever say that again to me, Sherlock Holmes, I'll never forgive you. Now," he clears his throat, grabs Sherlock's lapels and crashes their lips together, "Take me to bed. We have a show to open tomorrow."

And Sherlock obeys.

He's always been the amenable one.

xxxxxx

Irene is enjoying a rather large cup of coffee while wrapped up in a rather plush terry cloth robe as she gleefully scrolls through her contacts and presses her thumb over John Watson's name.

"Hello?" his groggy voice comes a moment later and she smiles broadly, taking in the Manhattan skyline from her midtown apartment.

"Your vlog is up."

He groans and she can hear the rustling of sheets. "You called me at... 8:30 in the morning to tell me that my video blog is online?"

"It's a vlog."

"I refuse to call it that. Do you know what today is?"

"Opening," she replies succinctly, slurping back another sip.

"Precisely," he bites out and she laughs.

"Don't pretend like you weren't already awake. I know your nerves by now."

"You're lucky you're charming," he mutters and she grins.

"It's one of my finer qualities, but my call did actually have a point."

"Which is?"

"Moriarty has managed to weasel an invite to the party. He'd probably try to come to the show if he didn't have his own to perform."

"Shit."

"Indeed. But I wanted to give you a heads up."
"I appreciate it."

She hums out a response and inspects her nails, deciding she needs a manicure before the evening. "I watched the vlog. It really is quite impressive. Funny, sweet, insightful."

"I think we have Sherlock to thank for its insight," he wryly replies, but he doesn't seem to be grasping the enormity of what she's saying.

"John, it's beautiful."

He goes quiet and when he speaks next, his voice is a bit rough. "Well, thanks."

"You're welcome. People will flip when they see it. Oh and tell my client to wear his best suit."

"He always wears his best suit. And what makes you think your client is with me?"

"Please, John. Don't patronize me. Why do you think I called you in the first place?"

He laughs and she smiles at the warm sound. "Fair enough."

"If you wore him out before his big night, though, I'll be quite cross. Or was it the other way around?"

He makes a noise that can only be classified as a squawk –

"Ta for now."

But she hangs up before he can really voice his indignation.

Her timing, after all, has always been impeccable.

xxxxxx

Molly can practically smell the flowers from the street as she makes her way into the theatre, dress slung over her shoulder and heels in hand as she tries to balance her bag of opening night gifts in her free hand.

"Hiya, Fred," she calls, placing his small, perfectly wrapped box on his desk.

"Oh you're a doll, Molls," he replies, dropping a kiss on her cheek before turning and picking up a large bouquet of flowers. "These are for you. They were delivered this afternoon."

"Oh gosh, they're beautiful. Um," she glances at her full arms, wondering how on earth she'll manage, before a voice behind her comes to her rescue.

"I got it!" John calls, jogging up with his own bag of presents and garment bag slung over his arm. "Here." He takes the bouquet in his free hand and gestures for her to lead the way.

"Mr. Watson, your gifts have been brought to your dressing room," Fred calls after them and John pauses on the stairs.

"Cheers, Fred!"

Molly’s arms feel like they’re about to fall off but she really doesn’t have anywhere to go.

“Come on,” John says, gently nudging her down the hall. “You can make camp in my room. It’ll be
a while yet before I’ve got to get ready.”

“You’re a saint,” she moans, toeing the door open and letting her heels drop to the floor. “I was worried I’d have to change in the hall. Oh goodness – ” she blurs out as she gets a good look around. There isn’t one inch of John’s worktop that isn’t covered in gift or flower.

“Bloody hell,” he murmurs. “I’ve never gotten this many flowers. It’s like a bloody botanical garden.”

“John!” Sherlock’s voice echoes down the hall before the man himself bursts through the door a moment later. “What is happening? Roses seem to have exploded all over my room.”

Molly snorts as John shakes his head.

“They’re called ‘gifts,’ Sherlock. It’s opening.”

“But – ” the man gapes for a moment, looking over his shoulder as if to make sure he isn’t being overheard. Or to ensure that the flowers were not a manifestation of his mind. “I’ve never had this many before.”

And something inside Molly pangs as she looks at Sherlock – totally innocent, completely sincere Sherlock – and she swallows hard as she reaches into her shopping bag and pulls out another box. “Well, here’s one more then.”

He blinks at her owlishly as John smiles softly, and she doesn’t really expect anything to happen – perhaps he’ll take the box and sweep out of the room as is his custom – but then he steps forward and takes the outstretched gift as he bends down to place a gentle kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, Molly Hooper.”

“You’re welcome, Sherlock Holmes,” she replies with a smile. “Happy Opening.”

“Happy Opening,” he murmurs, eyes darting to John as if to make sure that was all okay. And John, for his part, is looking so far beyond fond, it’s a wonder they get anything done.

“Oh go on, kiss. I’ll close my eyes.” She claps her hand over her face and turns around, waiting for the telltale smack of lips before deeming it safe to peek once more. But whatever moment they were sharing would have been ruined a second later anyway.

“Gents!” Sean bellows from the doorway, passing bottle shaped gifts around to each of them, Molly included. “It’s booze. I know, big surprise.” He shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs his shoulders, looking remarkably boyish. Or perhaps that’s just Molly being sentimental. After all, her contract on this show is technically over after this evening. It’ll be off to the next adventure for her.

“Ta, Sean,” John replies, pulling a very nice bottle of scotch out of its leather satchel.

“Not to get all soppy,” Sean begins, “but this has seriously been the most creatively fulfilling piece I’ve ever worked on. And that’s largely due to you two, so… yeah.” He digs his toe into carpet and stares at the ground as John and Sherlock try to figure out, in all of their Britishness, what to do with that compliment.

“Oh you boys,” Molly finally manages, gathering them all in for a hug, which is good for all of two seconds before the awkwardness seeps in.

“Is this normal?” Sherlock asks.
“No,” Sean and John reply and all three are quick to let go, leaving Molly to grab onto John so she doesn’t fall.

“Red carpet time,” Sean calls, bolting down the hall as Sherlock makes a noncommittal noise and gestures towards his dressing room.

“Does this mean I have to get dressed now?”

“It wouldn’t do to walk the red carpet naked,” John replies and Sherlock gets such a devilish look on his face that Molly is genuinely worried he might actually try it. John, however, doesn’t look perturbed which calms Molly’s fears since he’s rapidly become Sherlock’s behavior barometer.

“How’s Harry?” she asks as John hangs his suit on the hook on the back of his door.

“Good. Hopefully she’ll be on time. She was still sending me pictures of dresses as of 20 minutes ago, so we’ll see. Plus a text that I really hope was meant for Clara.”

Molly bursts out laughing, even as John’s ears pink. “I’m sorry. You’re a good brother, though. Comes with the territory.”

John shudders. “I’ll be in therapy for years and she’s footing the bill.” He sighs and turns toward her. “I’ll step out so you can get dressed. I’m sure there’s champagne cooling somewhere for those of you that can drink.”

“How’d you know?”

“Mike texted me a picture of the bucket filled with Veuve Clicquot, the wanker. I figured you and Greg were a part of that disaster waiting to happen.”

“And Irene,” Molly cheekily replies. “We’ll try not to be too soused by the time the curtain rises.”

“Thanks,” he replies, but then his smile softens. “Seriously, thank you, Molly. I know you were in my corner from the beginning, back before anyone even knew that I could do this. I just – I appreciate it. Truly.”

“Well, no thanks necessary. You got this role all on your own. You deserve it. The rest of us were just slow on the uptake.”

John flushes and Molly swallows hard. It’s all getting a bit sentimental. She can feel herself getting choked up and that is just unacceptable. She hasn’t even had any alcohol yet!

“Now, get out of here so I can get changed. Then you can have your room back.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gives her a mock salute and turns to go.

“Oh and John?”

“Hm?”

“Knock ’em dead.”

xxxxxx

Greg is not one to get opening night jitters – he usually knows by now whether his show is a hit or not – but, as with everything in this production it seems, things aren’t exactly going according to plan.
His stomach is in knots, his nerves are frayed, and his ability to gauge whether or not tonight will be a success has been shot to utter shit. Which is why he graciously accepts the champagne flute Irene is holding out to him and all but downs it in one go.

“Easy, Tiger,” Irene murmurs, eyes wide, but Mike’s just looking at him with respect and, frankly, that’s enough urging for Greg to hold out his glass for another.

They’re in the spare stage management office and Sally is looking at them like she might murder them at any moment. But only because she can’t partake. Not yet, anyway. She has a show to run.

“Chin up, Sal. I’ll buy you a drink at the party.”

“They’re free, you tosser,” she replies good-naturedly.

“Precisely.”

Sally glares and steals a sip of Molly’s drink as Greg gasps. “I’m telling Equity!”

“Greg Lestrade, the amount of dirt I have on you could topple your career.”

He can feel the blood drain from his flushed face because he knows that particular threat is absolutely true. “Fair enough,” he replies as Irene and Molly burst out laughing.

And then the dulcet tones of his whining leading man echo throughout the building.

"Why must we walk the red-carpet before the show?"

“And that’s my cue,” Irene trills, downing the rest of her champagne and hopping off the desk to smooth her skin-tight dress before finding her wayward client.

“Do we really have to walk the red carpet?” Molly asks, tugging on his sleeve, and he’s struck by how unbelievably beautiful she is that he can only stare for a moment.

“Stick with me,” he replies, buoyed by just enough liquid courage to hold out his arm, which she willingly takes. He leads her down the stairs in time to meet Sherlock and John on the landing, hastily done up in their suits so they can look respectable in front of the cameras.

Sherlock complains a bit more but Greg tunes him out, more than happy to let him be John’s problem for the moment, because Molly Hooper is on his arm, and frankly, that’s the only thing he needs to concern himself with at the moment.

“Brace yourself,” he murmurs and Molly has just enough time to ask “For what?” before the stage door opens and they’re met with utter and complete chaos. Half of 44th Street has been shut down to accommodate for the pedestrian traffic which has been booted off the sidewalk to make way for the red carpet in front of the theatre. People are shouting, cameras are flashing, and he was the idiot that decided to follow John Watson and Sherlock Holmes which means every bulb and every shout is aimed in his general direction. Christ.

Molly’s hand tightens on his arm and he tugs her a bit closer as he puts a hand on John’s shoulder. They’re being shepherded by press reps through the throngs attempting to get their tickets and catch a glimpse of a famous face at the same time.

“Sherlock,” a voice says to their left and Sherlock hits the brakes so hard, Greg runs into John, who’s attempting to sidestep the tall brunette.
Because Mycroft Holmes is standing in front of them, looking for all the world like he’s just wandered into the seventh circle of hell.

“Oh, Christ, you’re still here? Who gave you a ticket?” Sherlock barks and Irene raises a hand.

“I did.”

“Traitor.”

“Opportunist. You forget who signs my checks.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t,” he says with another glare, this time in Mycroft’s direction as he steps off the curb and allows himself to be situated in front of the first camera.

Greg waits his turn, following John who offers Molly a supportive wink and thumbs up before tossing himself to the hounds.

All in all, it’s not that bad and he lets himself get swept up in the excitement of the evening. Eventually the nerves leave him (or perhaps the champagne is finally kicking in) and he answers the questions asked of him with charm and grace and not a little humility. He knows that the magic happening onstage has only the slightest bit to do with him. And he’s more than happy to heap praise on his cast, particularly his two leading men. Indeed, John and Sherlock are the talk of the carpet and Greg is happy to see that only the weasel from the *Post* has the audacity to ask about the rumors floating in the ether, most of which have been perpetuated, if not started, by the man’s own paper.

Finally, he ends with David from TheatreMania, and Greg breathes out a sigh of relief. He’s made it through the vultures.

“And what can we expect to see tonight?” David asks and Greg can only grin.

“Fireworks.”

xxxxxx

Sherlock waits in the wings, watching John bounce stage right, trying to gain as much give as those sinfully delicious leather trousers will allow him, whilst thoroughly attempting to ignore the sounds of the audience on the other side of the curtain.

It’s a packed house, which means every one of those 1,530 seats is filled.

Perhaps that’s why John looks a bit like a deer caught in the headlights when Sally calls “Places.”

John’s stage fright is endearing – something he once would have viewed as a weakness, but which now he only looks on with fondness. It means John’s fallible. Human. And Sherlock needs a bit more human in his life.

“Hey,” Sherlock breathes behind him and John jumps, spinning around and eying him warily.

“What are you doing here? You’re never down here top of show.”

“I just wanted to see you.”

John raises an eyebrow and casts a cautious look around them, but the stage managers and production assistants are too busy doing their jobs to pay them any mind. And good thing, too, because there are words he has to say. And it’s in his sanity’s best interest that he say them before that curtain rises.
“You just wanted to see me? Sherlock, you saw me five minutes ago.”

“And to tell you that you saved me. If I had kept on going the way I was going, I would have ended my career and, quite possibly, my life. My career is my life, at least I thought it was… and then you walked in that damn studio door and took all the air out of the room.” The words all sound wrong, but John is looking at him like he’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, and so they continue. Unbidden, unwanted, unstoppable. “You’re not technically a doctor, but you healed me. In every sense of the word. So I suppose I needed to see you to say ‘Thank you,” he finishes with a little nod.

John blinks again, so Sherlock repeats himself. And he hates repeating himself, but for John, he’d put the words on loop for all eternity.

“To say ‘Thank you,’ and… and ‘Break a leg.”

He’s not sure what he expected to happen. The curtain is rising, the audience is clapping, and John is walking backwards, away from him to meet a fate foretold by three witches in a crowded wood.

But Sherlock would catch the five words John breathes, even if they had been as silent as the grave.

“I’m in love with you.”

Chapter End Notes

- An Anthora is that classic blue Greek coffee cup seen in every movie and tv show set in New York because they're sold at practically every corner deli and bodega.
- There really is an area by 72nd St in Central Park called Strawberry Fields. The Dakota looms just across the street. It's quite beautiful.
- Critics don't actually come to opening night. Critics come in the few days leading up to it, so by the time the curtain comes down on the opening, they have their reviews ready to be posted online and printed in the next day's newspapers.
- Castle Craig is a real luxury rehab facility in Scotland.
- Per Equity rules, actors really do have to sign in so their stage managers know if they're in the building or not. They are legally required to be at the theatre 30 minutes before curtain time. This is called "half hour," but actors usually give themselves more time than that.
- All stages have a ghost light. It's considered bad luck and poor form if you don't do it.
- All of the facts about the St. James and Jujamcyn Theatres are true.
- Opening night curtain times are generally earlier than usual theatre evenings, typically 6:30pm, so people can party afterwards. A typical Broadway schedule is Tuesday at 7pm and Wednesday-Saturday at 8pm, with 2pm matinees on Wednesday and Saturday, and a 3pm matinee on Sunday. Shows are off, or "dark," on Mondays. There are a couple of exceptions, but that's the typical Broadway schedule.
More Devils Than Vast Hell Can Hold

Chapter Summary

“John loves me.”

“Well okay then.”

“No, he told me he loved me.” He feels the need to spell it out and Irene bites her lip, trying to hide a soft smile.

“And did you reciprocate?”

“He was walking onstage. It’s not like we’re doing Romeo and Juliet and I can weave it into the script!”

Chapter Notes

Forgive the delay, lovelies - this one proved to be a beast.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
    Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
    The lunar, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
    One sees more devils than vast hell can hold.”
- A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act V Scene 1

Martha Hudson purposefully did not take one of her herbal soothers for precisely this moment. The moment that John Watson walks onstage on his own at the top of the show and stares out at the audience, full of pride and wonder and righteous fury. Something is different about this, though, and Martha should know. She’s been at every performance. The man before her is... electrified. Possessed. Tearing the stage apart before he’s even said a word. There's a flash of thunder, a strike of lightening and then darkness. When the lights onstage rise once more, John is gone and the witches have taken his place.

Martha rubs her arms to rid herself of the gooseflesh, but she knows it won't be the first time this evening that she'll be bowled over in every sense of the word. Greg has used her investment to create things she never thought she'd see onstage. And it's absolutely exquisite.

She inhales sharply as the witches continue their dance, sparing a quick glance around her to find the rest of the audience equally enraptured.

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air."
There's another crash of thunder followed swiftly by a flash of lightning and half of the audience starts. Martha smiles quietly, quite used to the noise by now after three weeks of previews, and settles in for the rest of the ride.

xxxxx

“I'm in love with you”

“I'm in love with you.”

“I'm in love with you.”

John silently berates himself as he steps offstage and deftly catches the towel Nate tosses at him to wipe his face.

“I’m an idiot,” he murmurs into the cloth, pulling himself up the stairs by the railing as Nate trails behind.

“You’re not an idiot.”

“You’re kind of an idiot,” Sean chimes in as he descends. “Sorry, I actually don’t know what you’re talking about – just thought I’d contribute to the conversation.”

“Ta, Sean,” John mutters, gently shoulder-checking the actor as he passes.

"Abuse!" Sean calls as he turns the corner to head stage left and John chuckles quietly, the knot in the center of his chest loosening slightly.

"What's the matter with you?" Nate asks as he follows John into his dressing room to help him change.

John hesitates for the briefest of moments, catching his dresser's eyes in the mirror. "I told Sherlock I loved him."

Nate's brows skyrocket. "Whoa."

"As I was walking onstage."

Nate bursts out laughing and throws John’s shirt in his face. "For an actor, your timing is shit."

John pulls the shirt over his head and smooths his hair in the mirror. "I know."

Even he's not sure what exactly happened. Sherlock was saying such lovely things and the words just slipped out. No, they didn't slip out. Not really. John knew exactly what he was saying because the admission has been a breath away from tumbling from his lips for weeks. Ever since Sherlock offered his starring role up on a platter and said, "So Thane of Cawdor... shall we?" and John had responded with a resounding "Oh god, yes."

Nate steps forward and fixes John's upturned collar. "Well, what did he say?"

John listens to Sherlock onstage through the intercom for a moment –

"Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way..."
"I didn't exactly give him a chance to respond."

Nate tugs John's jacket up over his shoulders and spins him, taking a comb out of his apron and
wrangling John's hair into some semblance of order.

"Good to go," he announces, gently shoving him towards the door, but John doesn't move far
beyond that. "John, you'll miss your cue and you do not want your first fuck up to be on opening
night."

And in a hilarious move John will appreciate later, they both automatically knock the wooden
doorframe to avoid tempting fate.

"What if I just ruined it?" he asks and Nate sighs deeply, clearly wanting to help and yet anxious to
get him moving in the general direction of the stage.

"John, you're too deep in it to see the way he looks at you. But I can tell you, as an outsider, he's got
a goddamn flashing neon sign over his head that says, 'I love this man.' You've got nothing to worry
about."

And John hopes that's true, but he saw the way Sherlock paled. How he swayed under the weight of
those five words and he holds tight to Nate's assurances, wrapping them around himself to fortify his
courage.

"Now please, for the love of god," Nate begs as he opens the door, "get on that stage before my ass
is fired."

Indeed, Sherlock is getting to the end of his speech which will signal John's entrance – the first time
they will come face to face since his declaration. He swallows hard, nods, and forces himself out the
door. He can do this.

"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty!"

Sherlock's voice ushers him through the halls, back down the stairs, and into the wings, Nate trailing
behind like a fussy mother hen. He awaits his cue and when it comes, Sherlock greets him with
warm eyes, a small bow, and a more-than-knowing smile.

"My dearest love,
Duncan comes here to-night."

And if John’s opening line is infused with a bit more passion than he intends, then so be it.

xxxxxx

Irene inhales and doesn’t exhale, holding the air hostage in her lungs as John enters and Sherlock
faces him for the first time. *Holy shit.*

You could scoop the sexual tension with a bloody spoon and she settles further into her seat with a
naughty grin. What few audience members weren’t paying attention are certainly sitting up straight
now. John and Sherlock as Macbeth and Lady M move around each other like magnets, always
making sure the other doesn’t stray too far away.

It's all she can do to make it to intermission without pumping her fist in the air in exultation. The
applause as the stage lights blackout and the house lights come up, though, is more than a little raucous, and the words she catches here and there over the general din are positively glowing.

She meets Mycroft's gaze as she weaves her way out of the aisle and raises an eyebrow as if to say, "So?"

His response is his usual eye roll, but there's something softer under it, something nicer. A familial pride that he fails to hide the moment his eyes find hers once more across the crowd. She laughs heartily and this time his huff of annoyance is genuine, turning on his expensive heel and marching towards the gents.

Irene sneaks backstage to freshen up her lipstick (but really to use the boys’ loo without having to wait in the gargantuan ladies’ room line.) and bumps into Sherlock on his way out of the toilet, quite literally. The man's ploughing ahead with his gaze fully fixed on the floor, not a care in the world for who might be in his path.

"Whoa, Olivier, where are you going?"

"Hm, what?"

"Hello to you too," she retorts. "I said, 'Where are you going?' Your dressing room's that way."

"I'm avoiding that area at all costs."

She tilts her head, all thought of lipstick or loo forgotten. "And why would you do that?"

He shrugs not unlike a child and stares at the floor once more, brow creasing as if trying to work out a particularly hard maths equation.

She reaches out to feel his forehead, which is sweaty but relatively cool to the touch. "What's wrong? It's a fantastic show. The best you've done."

"John loves me."

She drops her hand. "Well okay then."

"No, he told me he loved me." He feels the need to spell it out and she bites her lip, trying to hide a soft smile.

"And did you reciprocate?"

"He was walking on stage. It's not like we're doing Romeo and Juliet and I can weave it into the script!" he spits out, throwing his hands in the air. "And now I'm avoiding him because too much time has passed since he initially said it. I've seen romantic comedies, I know how this works!"

"Oh for the love of god." She grabs his elbow and steers him toward Sally’s stage management perch overlooking the stage, away from prying eyes and listening ears. "Do you love him?"

"Irene – "

"Sherlock Holmes, do not bullshit me on this. Do you love him?"

Sherlock opens his mouth, struggling for a moment, before quickly closing it once more. "I'm not sure. I think so."

Irene sighs. "Well figure it out." She knows his answer. She's known it ever since he walked into that
studio to read with John during his audition. He’d shown up, which was more than he’d done for any other actor. Any other person, really.

“Places for the top of act two. Places, please,” Sally calls over the intercom from the SM office and both Sherlock and Irene jump.

“I’m going to be late getting back to my seat and Sally is going to kill us for being in her lair. Now,” she grabs his lapels and straightens him out, smoothing the material over his shoulders, “get out there and prove every person who ever doubted this pairing wrong.”

“Oh kay,” he breathes, and that in itself is a miracle. The man never acquiesces without at least some snide remark.

But love, she supposes, is a little bit like that.

xxxxxx

They’re nearing the end of the performance and John’s skin is aflame with excitement, adrenaline, and not a little bit of worry. He hasn’t spoken to Sherlock since his admission and, while their onstage scenes have had more chemistry than ever (as if that were even possible), John admits to feeling a little out of his depth.

He’s never loved somebody like this - like he needs to breathe them into his lungs and hold them there until they dissolve into his blood and his tissue, down to the very marrow of his bones. It’s morbid and more than a bit terrifying. Which is why he's standing offstage by Clara watching Sherlock do the top of Act V, because John is genuinely worried that if he removes his gaze from him for one moment, the man who is perfect in his imperfection will drift away from him, never to be caught again.

John holds his breath as Sherlock shuffles onstage from the other side, disheveled, distraught, and deranged, staring at his hands as if the very secret of life could be found in their lines.

"Yet here's a spot."

"Hark! he speaks," Grant as the Doctor says, "I will set down what comes from him, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly."

"Out, damned spot! out, I say!" Sherlock screams, dropping to his knees and rubbing his hands raw. "One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murk!--Fie, my lord, fie!" he yells, facing in John's direction as if he knows he is a silent watcher. "A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him."

Sherlock speaks with such an innate brokenness and John hangs on every word, leaning his elbow on the prop shelf illuminated by the soft blue light that highlights the sharp edges of the dark wings. And John daren’t move because Sherlock’s eyes are locked on him like a harbor light in a storm.

"He has spoke what he should not, I am sure of that:” Kevin steps forward and worries his hands, briefly blocking Sherlock from view. “Heaven knows what he has known.”

And it’s as if Sherlock is reading his mind, because he shuffles downstage just as John steps to the right, their gazes finding each other once again.
“Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!” Sherlock wails.

It’s terrifying and mesmerizing and, quite frankly, the most seductive thing John Watson has ever laid eyes on. The rest of the scene plays out and he’s honestly not sure if he’s drawn breath, but he must have because he’s still standing – feat of epic proportions if there ever was one. Sherlock exits on the opposite side of the stage, taking all of John’s warmth with him, despite the heat of the instruments hanging above.

And he does not move until Clara gently prods him in the back, throwing him a concerned glance as the action onstage approaches his cue. He shakes his head and takes the sword she’s holding out for him, managing a wink as he turns to make his entrance. He can feel the lights on his face and the energy of the audience, but the rest of the play is a blur. And before he knows it, he’s at the curtain call feeling a surge of adrenaline he hasn’t felt since his boots hit the ground in Afghanistan. It’s complete chaos – Greg, Molly, Sarah, Ryan, and Anderson are brought onstage for their own bow, someone is shoving a bouquet of roses in his hand, and the roar of the audience is positively deafening. The only thing grounding him, the only thing making any of this register or worthwhile, is the steady feeling of Sherlock’s hand in his own, offering reassuring squeezes every few moments as the enormity of the moment threatens to overtake him and pull him under the surf.

xxxxxx

Sherlock is separated from John in the backstage melee as the curtain falls and that is just unacceptable.

“John?” he calls as he’s pushed towards the wings, his fellow thespians shaking his hand and clapping him on the back all the way. He can just make out the shorter man on the opposite side of the stage receiving much of the same treatment, but reaching him at the moment will look something like the Battle of Thermopylae, he imagines.


Now if only the blasted man would give him a chance to *reciprocate*.

If he gets up the stairs before the rest of the hoard, he can cross over on the fourth floor and go down the stairs on stage left to reach John. It’s a bit of a roundabout way to do it, but desperate times…

He takes off, nearly knocking down Andrew on his way, and takes the stairs two at a time, feeling his already soaked shirt stick to the small of his back.

“I’m in love with you.”

Sherlock’s never been in love, but he imagines that this is what it feels like. Like he’s being consumed, immolated, by the destruction of every single one of his senses when John is not in his immediate vicinity. And sometimes even when he is, but Sherlock is not sure it will ever be enough. He wants to crawl inside him, burrowing into the very flesh and bone that make John the most fascinating puzzle Sherlock has ever encountered.

He gets held up on the third floor when Greg catches up with him and offers what Sherlock can only assume are sincere and heartfelt compliments and expressions of gratitude. He really can’t be bothered to process any of them at the moment because *John is on the other side of the stage* and if Sherlock doesn’t get there immediately, he truly might turn violent.
Finally, as if the universe has heard his internal screaming, the crowds part (as much as they can in
the narrow backstage hallways) and allow him to bolt through the throngs of people, making it to
John’s door with just enough time for a small pep talk before bursting through the door. John’s head
snaps up in surprise and Sherlock inhales to let the words just tumble forth, but then Harry Watson is
hurting herself at him and sobbing into his shirt.

Well that was not part of the plan.

“Um…” he manages, awkwardly patting her back as John shoots him an apologetic look over her
shoulder. “It’s okay?”

John stifles a snort of laughter and places a hand on Harry’s back in some semblance of comfort.

“That was beautiful,” she manages, muffled against his chest, before pulling away and wiping her
eyes. “Absolutely beautiful.”

“She gets likes this,” John chuckles, hand never leaving his distraught sister’s back, and Sherlock
supposes live theatre can have that kind of affect on people. He himself hasn’t necessarily
succumbed to the more visceral side while in the audience –

But then he catches John’s eye across the room and he remembers every look, every nuance, every
line John delivered that was like a suckerpunch to Sherlock’s solar plexus.

“Harriet, would you give us a moment please?”

“Why?” John asks even as Harry hiccups an acquiescence.

“Because I’m going to ravish you up against the wall and I’d prefer we not have an audience.”

Harry’s jaw drops and John turns positively scarlet.

“If you don’t mind,” he amends when he realizes his request could be viewed as a bit ‘curt.’

“Not information I needed, but congratulations all the same,” Harry manages, tossing her still-
blushing brother a positively saucy grin and heading for the door. “Right then, that’s me off. I’ll see
you at the party. Try and make it there this time.”

Not easily fazed, Sherlock adds to Harry’s file in his mind palace. Excellent.

She’s gone with a wink and the moment the door click shut behind her, Sherlock turns on John with
what he wished was a predatorial glance, but the sudden anxiety that washes over him makes him
think that reality likely has him looking distinctly more vulnerable.

But John waits patiently, as John seems to do in most things. At least when they concern Sherlock.

“I do, too,” he blurts out. “Love you, I mean. I love you, too.”

Christ could that have been more convoluted? His wants to roll his eyes, but that would mean taking
his gaze from the breathtaking expression of wonder, humor, and awe currently lighting up John’s
face.

“C’mere,” John manages before they’re crossing the room and crashing into one another, the force of
John’s head start banging Sherlock up against the door. “I believe you said something about
ravishing?”

“Mm,” Sherlock groans an affirmation before spinning them around and pinning John in his place. “I
imagine your dresser will be here momentarily to collect your costume.”

“Ye-ah.” John’s breath hitches as Sherlock works a hand between them, unfastening John’s trousers while nipping at his neck. “God, Sherlock,” John murmurs, sliding his hands up into Sherlock’s hair and tugging.

The sensation causes Sherlock to moan against John’s skin, and as much as he would love to stay here nestled in the crook of John’s neck having his curls played with, there are more pressing things to attend to. Sherlock tugs John’s trousers open and down, and John hisses as the cool air hits his flushed skin. Placing a quick peck on John’s swollen lips, Sherlock drops to his knees with a wink that has John’s head thunking back against the door, chest rising and falling as he pants harshly.

“God, I love you,” John whispers, eyes suddenly sober as if trying to quell the desire that had darkened them only moments before, his hand coming up to cup Sherlock’s cheek. Sherlock turns his head and kisses John’s palm, needing to break their gaze if only so he doesn’t drown in the overwhelming feeling of love that’s currently making his chest ache.

He tugs John’s pants down to his thighs, letting his hard cock brush against his cheek as he leans forward and places a kiss to John’s stomach. His right hand holds the man’s hip in place while his left hold’s tight to John’s right, fingers lacing together as John braces for the onslaught. And sure enough, when Sherlock first presses the flat of his tongue to the tip of John’s cock, John breathes out a “Fuck,” and nearly breaks Sherlock’s fingers.

Sherlock hums his pleasure which only makes John squirm more. Unfortunately, they can’t draw this out, as much as Sherlock might want to. There are literally a thousand people waiting for them, not to mention a whole group of crew members who can’t go to the party until they do their jobs. And their jobs require John and Sherlock to not be half-naked in the middle of John’s dressing room.

Sherlock reaches down and adjusts himself in his trousers, regretting that John is the only one half-naked so far. He moans as he sinks down on John’s shaft, enveloping it in a warmth that has John’s free hand scrabbling for something to hold on to. He settles for Sherlock’s hair once more, not pressing or tugging, merely guiding. The feeling, though, is enough for Sherlock to shift forward in an effort to grind against something. And John, bless him, slumps down a bit and gets his leg far enough out for Sherlock to straddle it.

And the first press of Sherlock’s hard cock to John’s shin has both men groaning.

“God I’m not going to last long if you keep that up.” And John’s voice sounds positively wrecked, so Sherlock grinds faster and sucks harder.

Between the noises John is making, and the feel of the man’s hard cock against his tongue, Sherlock knows he could probably come from rutting against him alone. It wouldn’t take much, considering he’s been wanting to rip the man’s clothes off for the better part of the evening.

He reaches the hand that’s not entwined with John’s between the man’s legs to cup his heavy balls. They’re drawn up tight and Sherlock rolls them a bit in his palms before reaching further back and pressing against his perineum. A noise tears itself from John’s throat as if someone had just sat on his diaphragm and Sherlock does it again just to see if he can get a repeat performance. He does and a thrust that send John’s cock to the back of Sherlock’s throat, much to the younger man’s delight.

“Sherlock… Christ… I’m –” John’s hand tightens in his hair in warning, and Sherlock feels a swell of amusement amid the arousal – as if that would possibly deter him from sucking down all John had to offer. The thought alone has his hips snapping against John’s leg that much harder.
“Chriiiiiissst,” John groans, letting go of Sherlock’s hand to grab onto his shoulders, if only to keep himself upright. Sherlock can feel him swelling on his tongue, and he works him through it, swallowing every pulse of hot come that John pumps into him. “Oh god,” he nearly sobs, head falling back and hitting the door once more. “God, Sherlock,” he pants.

Sherlock lets him slide from his mouth and places one hand on John’s stomach as if to ensure the man doesn’t collapse on him, using his other to free himself from his leather confines and groaning aloud when he’s no longer constricted. He begins stroking before he even realizes he’s doing it, the throbbing need that’s set fire to his very veins overriding any rational thought.

John sinks to his knees and gets his hand around Sherlock’s, pressing his forehead against him as he holds a tissue beneath his leaking cock.

“Come on, Sherlock. That’s it. God, you’re gorgeous,” he whispers, causing Sherlock to moan against his lips. “You’re close, aren’t you. So close.”

Sherlock whimpers and attempts to mouth at John’s lips, missing completely.

“That’s it. God, I love you.” John’s hand tightens around his own and Sherlock clenches, thrusting his cock harder through the tunnel their hands have created. “I can’t wait to get you home. Undo you properly. I’m going to make you scream, Sherlock. Come. Now.”

And that’s all is takes – Sherlock’s head falls back as his hips snap forward, pulsing come into the waiting tissue John holds in his hand as John gently pumps him through it.

“Beautiful. God, I could watch you do this all day,” John murmurs, pressing a fierce kiss to the corner of Sherlock’s open mouth.

It takes a moment to come back to himself, but when he does, Sherlock blinks to focus on the man in front of him before pulling him tightly to his chest and burying his face in the crook of John’s neck.

“Hey, hey,” John murmurs, hands stroking up and down Sherlock’s back as the man shakes in his arms.

He’s not sure where this is coming from. Frankly, it’s alarming and more than a little embarrassing, but he can blame it on the opening night emotions later. Right now, he simply sinks into John’s embrace, cataloging the ripple of every muscle, the beads of sweat at his temple, the smell of shampoo in his hair, the scent of sex in the air.

“I love you,” he whispers against John’s shirt and a moment later, John’s hand comes up to cup the back of Sherlock’s head.

“I love you, too, you madman.”

Sherlock’s chest feels like someone just used a defibrillator on it, but before he can get too soppy, a knock on the door sounds and Nate’s voice echoes through the wood a moment later.

“Gentlemen, I adore you and I’m thrilled for you, but for the love of god, stop shagging in your costumes.”

xxxxxx

By the time they arrive at the party, John is still smiling in way that leaves no room for doubt about what they were up to and just how good it was.
He lets the cheeky grin slide from his face for just the briefest of moments, though, as he takes a look around the hall. The cast and crew had been shuttled from the theatre on 44th St. to Cipriani 42nd St. just a few blocks away, and the converted Italian Renaissance-inspired former bank does not disappoint. The columns are lit up in red and blue, giving the room a nearly royal purple haze, while circular tables dot the marble floor adorned with candles and flowers.

The producers really spared no expense, it seems, as a waiter approaches and hands John a glass of what can only be very fine scotch, while turning and handing Sherlock a gin martini.

“Color me impressed,” John murmurs, taking a sip and groaning as it smoothly slides down his throat.

Sherlock hums in reply and takes a taste of his own beverage, eyebrow raising at the quality of the gin, no doubt.

People are starting to realize they’ve arrived and scattered applause begins. They wave self-consciously before being ushered over to do more press, sadly relinquishing their drinks to Irene and Mike, who wait to the side with knowing smirks on their faces.

The questions are unoriginal and his answers likely redundant, but John is riding the kind of high that only good theatre and amazing love can cause. It’s all a little bit heady, which is why he gratefully accepts his scotch back from Mike after the camera bulbs have finished flashing in his face. He takes a giant gulp and attempts to regain his eyesight.

“So?” John asks, quirking an eyebrow at his agent and the man seems to need a moment to get himself under control before nodding and offering, “Best thing you’ve ever done, John. Bar none.”

“Are we done with this tedium?” Sherlock asks, tilting his head back toward the red carpet where Greg and Molly are currently being accosted.

“Indeed,” Irene drawls and gestures toward the center of the room. “Shall we take a lap?”

“Do we have to?” John mutters and Sherlock smirks beside him.

But taking a lap brings him face to face with his sister once more who quickly approaches with Clara on her arm.

“Have you bathed? Are you safe to touch?” Harry asks as she leans in and plants a kiss on John’s cheek.

"You're hilarious."

"I know," she murmurs, as Clara steps forward and kisses both John and Sherlock in turn, offering her congratulations.

John's about to launch into how invaluable she was to the process, because lord knows Sherlock won't, but a voice to his left interrupts.

"Sherlock."

"Christ, haven't you crawled back to your cave yet?" Sherlock spits and John's eyebrows skyrocket at the venom in his voice.

A man has approached them: tall, thin, British, decidedly pompous air. John had seen him from a distance just before they did the red carpet at the theatre, but was whisked away before he could
piece together his identity. Clearly Sherlock isn't fond of him, though, and that's enough to have John on edge.

"Uh, hi," he offers when it becomes clear that no one else plans on breaking the awkward silence. "I'm - "

"John Watson, yes," the man finishes for him, which causes the hair on the back of John's neck to stand on end.

"And you are?" he asks and the man sniffs.

"No one you need to concern yourself with."

"Oh please," Sherlock scoffs. "He's Mycroft Holmes, also known as my brother. A minion of her Majesty's Secret Service, obnoxious arsehole, and all-around unwanted being."

"Your brother," John repeats before turning towards the supposed other Holmes. "You're his brother?"

"Oh did he tell you I died? That's low, Sherlock, even for you."

"Unfortunately not. I'll have to remember that for next time," Sherlock sneers and John places his hand on the taller man's back in an effort to bring his blood pressure back down.

"All right, children, play nice."

The Holmes men bristle at the comparison, but straighten their suits and assume a dignified air once more. It's all John can do not to snort, especially when he catches Harry's equally incredulous look.

Finally, the man known as Mycroft clears his throat, looking for all the world like this is the last place he wants to be. “The play was… unexpected, Sherlock. And good. Quite good.”

Sherlock stares at him for a moment. “Piss off, Mycroft, you’re scaring me.”

“He means 'thank you,'” John offers, somewhat bizarrely touched, even as he watches Sherlock spin on his heel and disappear into the crowds, tossing a "Come on, John," over his shoulder as he goes.

God, he loves that man.

xxxxxx

The crowds press in on him, suffocating him no matter where in the hall he retreats to. He’s not a people person, but like any actor, he enjoys a good ego-stroking. Still, he’d prefer to be at home – or John’s home – surrounded by comfort and tea and pajamas.

Some say love is sentiment and sentiment is a distraction. Sherlock was once a subscriber to that particular philosophy, and to be perfectly honest, he might not have been far off - for his mind is so full of John Watson that he doesn’t hear someone approach him from behind, a grave tactical error on his part.

“Sherlock Holmes,” a voice (that voice) sing-songs and every muscle in Sherlock’s body seizes. “Nice night for a party.”

“Jim. Pleasure,” Sherlock manages as he turns, hands clasped behind his back in that military way John does only too well.
James Moriarty stands in a perfectly tailored suit, hair slicked to perfection, looking entirely too smug with Mary Morstan on his arm.

“I suppose congratulations are in order,” Moriarty drawls, glancing at the extravagance around them. “But then again, you did always attract the best, myself included.”

Nausea claws at his gut, but his expression never falters.

It’s to Mary’s credit that she shifts uncomfortably and attempts to pull her arm from the crook of Moriarty’s elbow, but the snake of a man holds firm.

“I didn’t get a chance to catch the show, pity. But I will, Sherlock,” Moriarty murmurs, stepping closer, right up into Sherlock’s space. “I will catch you.”

“Jim,” Mary murmurs, but Moriarty doesn’t seem to hear. He leans further in, nose nearly brushing the jut of Sherlock’s defiant chin.

“I owe you a fall, Sherlock,” he whispers and it takes every ounce of Sherlock’s self-control not to reel back in disgust.

But then over Moriarty’s shoulder, he sees John glance over from his spot by the bar, body immediately snapping to attention as he registers Moriarty’s proximity.

His lips murmur an ‘excuse me’ to Harry as he stalks across the room. He approaches all smiles and general congeniality, but his shoulders are tight and his eyes are hard as he claps Sherlock on the shoulder, letting his palm linger for a moment as he gently and surreptitiously tugs him away from the serpentine man in front of them.

“All right?”

“Why wouldn’t we be,” Moriarty replies, voice high and repulsive, and John’s hand on his shoulder tightens.

Sherlock holds his breath, because for once in his life, he’s honestly not sure how this will all play out, as John steps forward (smile still plastered to his face) and dips his chin low next to Moriarty’s. It’s hard to hear, but Sherlock could pick out that particular threatening timbre anywhere.

“Touch him and I will end you.”

Moriarty’s eyes flash with surprise for the briefest of moments, before narrowing once more, smarmy smile still firmly in place. “Aw you’ve got yourself a little lapdog. How quaint.”

Sherlock does not rise to the bait, though he’s sure he could offer a verbal lashing if need be. No, he’s more concerned with (and enthralled by) the silent standoff happening in front of him. John’s shoulders have kicked back with military precision and he’s using every inch of his not-so-substantial height to appear larger than any man in the room. In fact, Sherlock would bet money that John could take most anyone in the immediate vicinity. The thought both makes him proud and spikes his arousal.

Mary’s gaze is darting between them but John is paying her no mind. Sherlock secretly relishes that fact. He can see Irene, Harry, Mike, Greg and Molly hovering on the periphery, their little entourage ready to jump in at a moment’s notice. Even Mycroft lingers, pretending to be on his phone, but his gaze continually finds their little semi-circle in the corner of the room.

“I never did ask how rehab treated you. So rude of me,” Moriarty continues, needles twisting ever
deeper. “Which of the twelve steps are you on now? Four? How’s that ‘moral inventory’ coming?”

John snarls and begins to step forward as a hand clamps down on his shoulder none too gently.

“Gents, all good here?” Sean asks, sidling up to stand behind John, hand keeping the shorter man in place. His body language is easygoing, but the fact that he’s placed himself so squarely at John’s right proves that he’s prepped to come to blows. And he knows which side he’s fighting on.

“Just fine,” Moriarty replies, shoving his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels, manic smile firmly in place.

“You sure?” Andrew asks, appearing out of nowhere to stand behind Sherlock with Kevin hot on his heels.

Moriarty glances at all of them in turn, coming to the easy conclusion that he’s vastly outnumbered.

“Mary?” he questions, holding his arm out and waiting for her to take it as he starts to lead her away. “Remember, Sherlock. I owe you.”

He stiffens, but John’s fingers surreptitiously find him amidst the bodies and he runs his thumb across Sherlock’s knuckles.

“Asshole,” Sean mutters as he grabs a drink off a passing tray and downs it in one. “He always was a little shit. Mary Morstan, too.” He freezes. “No, offense,” he offers in John’s direction as John continues to glare at their retreating backs.

“None taken.”

And Sherlock breathes deeply, swallowing hard as he glances at the men around him. The men ready to fight on his behalf. He’s never had people, friends, willing to do that for him. Of course, there’s John and John was more than he ever expected, but John is an anomaly. To have the rest of them have his back as well? Well, Sherlock thinks, that’s quite something.

“You good?” Andrew asks and it takes Sherlock a moment to realize the young man is addressing him.

“Yes, good,” he manages, nodding to show more confidence than he feels.

“John?” Kevin asks next and the shorter man manages a stiff nod.

It’ll take more than a drink to bounce back from that. Luckily for him, Harry Watson can always be counted on.

"Fuck me," she suddenly blurts, nose buried in her phone. "John, I know you don't read reviews, but blimey." She holds the device up to his face and Sherlock squints over his shoulder as he scans the first few sentences of Brantley's Times review, catching words like "masterpiece," "exceptional," and "tour-de-force."

It’s everything they could have hoped for. Various whoops go up around the hall, proving that the review (one of many, he assumes) is making the rounds. Mrs. Hudson’s herbal soother has clearly kicked in, since she’s currently holding court in conversation with a potted plant. Greg is raising his glass and toasting him from afar, and even Molly has the jolly flush of inebriation tainting her cheeks.

Only Irene and Mike are watching them with calculating gazes. Oh they’re happy, no doubt, but they also know they’re the actors’ first line of defense. And if Moriarty is becoming a problem again (if,
Sherlock scoffs) then they need to be battle-ready.

Sean, Andrew, and Kevin have drifted off, no doubt to celebrate the victory of a rare and well-earned New York Times’ review, leaving Sherlock and John in the center of the room, the ghost of Moriarty’s encounter haunting their every breath.

“I don’t want to think about him,” Sherlock states plainly because he cannot stand seeing the slump of John’s shoulders on a night when he should be celebrating how unbelievably good he is at what he does. “He doesn’t matter, John.”

John nods, but his gaze remains firmly fixed on the marble floor, fists clenched at his sides.

“Take me home,” Sherlock quietly requests, but it carries none of the heat that he imagined those words having at the beginning of the night. He’s exhausted and angry and elated and (if he’s being honest with himself), just a bit anxious. Frightened, even. Right now, he wants tea and bed and John. Most importantly John.

The man in question finally lifts his eyes and Sherlock nearly stumbles at the mixture of pain and rage there. But the thing that shines through most of all is the thing that John allowed himself to admit mere hours ago. The thing that Sherlock is still trying to wrap his not inconsequential mind around.

Love.

“Okay,” John finally murmurs. “Let’s go home.”

xxxxxx

Greg takes a sip of the fizzy drink in front of him and pops a couple of ibuprofen, praying to any deity listening that his headache goes away. He’s been to countless opening nights by this point in his career – he should know how to pace himself.

At least he’d gotten John and Sherlock to stay through the speeches. That had been a small miracle. It would have mortifying for Mrs. Hudson to thank them (and her speech was already going to be interesting) only to have the spotlight not be able to find them in the room. Speaking of –

“Gregory Lestrade, I’m surprised at you,” Martha Hudson chirps as she walks into her sitting room and places a steaming pot of tea on the table.

“Bless you,” he groans, reaching over and pouring himself a cuppa.

“A grown man intoxicated like that.”

“I put on a critically acclaimed play with a man who’s never done Shakespeare before and the profession’s most difficult actor. It was well-earned drunkenness.”

She shakes her head in amusement and fails to keep the stern look on her face.

Greg had helped make sure Martha got home last night and the woman insisted he take one of her guest rooms. Since he was in no condition to get himself into a taxi and across the park to his own flat, he readily agreed. Which is why he’s perched on Martha Hudson’s couch groaning into his hands as his body rebels against all the damage he did to it the night before. He’s too old for this shite.

“We need to have a meeting,” he says after a quiet minute.
He hears something being set down on the counter a moment later. “I know,” she replies, her resigned voice filtering in from the kitchen.

Greg sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. It’s not uncommon for fellow actors to attend opening night parties, even when they themselves haven’t seen the show yet. Greg would consider it the norm, in fact. But James Moriarty had a purpose beyond casual hobnobbing last night. And that purpose is going to be a thorn in Greg’s side if they don’t try to nip it in the bud.

Which is why, less than two hours later, Mrs. Hudson’s living room (one of them, at least) has gained Irene, Mike and even Mycroft Holmes. All they’re waiting on is the arrival of John and Sherlock, which is signaled a moment later by the doorbell.

All of the occupants share a look before Irene gracefully slides off the couch and opens the door. "Welcome to the Situation Room," she greets and both Sherlock and John blink blankly at her.

"I beg your pardon?" John asks as they enter.

"Situation Room. It's a White House/American thing," Greg mutters.

"She's been binging on The West Wing when she hasn't been taking care of you sorry souls," Mike offers by way of explanation.

“Oh,” John replies, shrugging off his coat and hanging on the rack by the door. He looks tired, but no more than is par for the course after an opening. Sherlock, though, is the real giveaway. He still hasn’t said a word – even after making eye contact with Mycroft. Now Greg knows something’s wrong.

“Christ, this must be what Churchill felt like,” John mutters as he takes a seat on the couch and accepts a cup of tea from Mrs. Hudson.

“Something like that,” Mycroft drawls.

“If this is about Moriarty, we might as well get it over and done with,” Sherlock finally clips. “I’d rather enjoy my day off in my own way, if it’s all the same to you.”

Greg clears his throat, attempting to enter these waters gently, but Irene brazenly dives right in.

“Of course it’s about Moriarty. He walked up to you at your own opening night and openly threatened you. Now what can he use as ammunition?”

“Does it matter? Facts don’t seem to be his forte,” John offers and Greg can’t help but agree. He was there last time. He knows what was said and hardly any of it was true.

“Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson begins, “I’m horribly out of the loop. I know what happened all those years ago, but you kept me very much in the dark.”

And it’s true. They did. For good reason.

All eyes in the room find Sherlock, and John unconsciously shifts a bit closer to him on the couch. Greg smiles slightly and offers Sherlock an encouraging nod when the actor’s eyes find his.

Sherlock inhales deeply before letting loose a string of words even Greg has trouble keeping up with: “Mrs. Hudson, a few years ago, I spent the better part of a year in rehab kicking some rather nasty habits. I’ve been clean ever since. Greg has done his best to rejuvenate my career with more success than I ever could have hoped for, but it appears Moriarty would like to finish the job. I’m in
love with John and he’s in love with me and if Moriarty attempts to come anywhere near him, I will not be held accountable for my actions.” He inhales sharply. “Does that suffice?”

Ringing silence hovers over the apartment as six pairs of eyes stare at him with utter incredulity. But leave it to Mrs. Hudson to break the ice as only Mrs. Hudson can.

“Well I knew that, dear.”

“Well, not the rehabilitation, no, but that,” she points at the lack of space between John and Sherlock on the couch, “I saw from a mile away.”

Greg snorts as Irene tips her head back in laughter. Mike is shaking with barely suppressed giggles and even Mycroft looks like he’s trying to hide a smile. Well, his version of a smile which is really just a quirk of the lips.

John and Sherlock smile at each other and the emotion is clear from across the room. But then Sherlock sobers and something in Greg’s stomach twists. “If you can see it, then won’t Moriarty be able to as well?” he asks, and the laughter immediately dies down.

John frowns. “The show is open, the reviews are glowing. Do you think another expose, no matter how unfounded, could really impact ticket sales that much?”

“Tony nominations,” Mike quietly reminds and John blanches.

“Shit, I didn’t think of that.”

“You should,” Greg replies. “They come out on Tuesday. Less than a week.”

“This isn’t over,” Irene murmurs. “If the show gets any kind of nomination – and I can’t imagine it won’t – this campaign goes on for another month and a half. That’s a lot of time for Moriarty to cook something up before the big night.”

Greg pinches the bridge of his nose again and stares at his shoes. And if he had the energy or the guts to look up, he’d notice everyone else doing much of the same thing. Because what’s the answer? Sit around and twiddle their thumbs, knowing a bomb could drop at any moment?

Out of the corner of his eye, Greg sees John hook his pinky around Sherlock’s where the man’s hand rests on his leg. “We could – ” John clears his throat, “we could keep it a secret. I mean, we’ve practically been doing that already. Maybe we’ll be more careful, though,” he finishes, glancing up at Sherlock with an almost apologetic look.

Sherlock half-smiles and nods after a moment. “We could do that.”

Greg drops his head once more because this isn’t fair. These two guys are finally happy and they’re being forced to hide it from the world. He honestly doesn’t think he’d have the strength were he in their position.

“The stories and gossip will still continue,” Irene says, “but we can barrage them with other press. Good press. That vlog worked wonders.”

“Told you,” Mike points out good-naturedly and John chuckles.
“Yeah, yeah.”

“My boys are strong,” Mrs. Hudson says with a smile, standing and coming around the back of the couch to wrap an arm around each of their necks. “We can weather this.”

And finally Mycroft Holmes clears his throat and stands, buttoning up his suit-jacket as if silently bringing a dignified end to the meeting.

“Gentlemen, I think it’s safe to say that everyone in this room has your very best intentions at heart. If Moriarty makes a move, we’ll be ready.”

It’s the most sentimental Greg has ever heard Mycroft get, but Sherlock cuts the saccharine with a typical parting shot.

“Clearly someone had his cake this morning.”

xxxxxx

[The camera powers up, revealing a shaky view of a hardwood floor and an unmade bed.]

John’s Voice: Today is Tuesday, April 28th, and it’s Tony nomination day, which is the only reason I’m awake at this godforsaken hour. [The camera swings to a mirror, showing John in his pajamas, hair askew] Good morning. I shouldn’t complain – It’s actually only 8:04am, but we actors have always been a bit wussy about that, I suppose.

[The camera drops to the ground once more and follows John’s bare feet into a living room. It swings around, framing Sherlock in nothing but his flannel pajama trousers brushing his teeth through the bathroom door. Sherlock catches sight of the camera and the brush hangs limply between his lips.]

Sherlock: John, what are you doing?

John: Say, ‘Good morning.’

Sherlock: John…

John: Relax. [his hand comes forward and brushes an errant curl away from Sherlock’s forehead] It’s not for the vlog, it’s for us.

Sherlock: I don’t follow.

John: It’s a big morning. I thought we might want a record of it.

[Sherlock smiles and spits his toothpaste in the sink.]

Sherlock: I’m going to tell Irene you called it a ‘vlog.’

John: Don’t you dare.

[The camera goes dark.]

[A closeup on the plaid of John’s pajama trousers as he sets the camera up on top of the television. He steps back, revealing Sherlock sitting on the couch facing the camera and handing John a cup of coffee as he takes his seat next to him. The television flicks on and applause can be heard.]

A female voice: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the 2015 Tony Award nominations. We’re
coming to you live from the Paramount Hotel’s Diamond Horseshoe in New York City –

Sherlock: Who’s that?

John: Seriously?

Sherlock: Do I look serious?

John: Sherlock, that’s Audra McDonald. She has, like, six Tony Awards. The most of any actor in history.

Sherlock: Overachiever.

[John snorts and directs his attention back to the television.]

Audra McDonald: The nominees for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Musical are:

Sherlock: Boring.

John: Stop it.

Sherlock: What? It is!

John: Go back to bed if you’re going to be this cranky!

Sherlock: Only if you come with me.

John: Don’t start. I might.

Audra McDonald: The nominees for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in a Musical are:

Sherlock: You were nominated last year.

John: Are you going to listen to any of this?

Sherlock: Pointless.

John: I was.

Sherlock: Hm?


[Sherlock makes a non-committal noise and sips at his coffee. John smiles fondly and turns back to the television]

Audra McDonald: And the nominees for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Play are:

Sherlock: How many Tony nominations do you have?

John: For the love of God, Sherlock. I’m going to have to look all of these up online later, aren’t I?”

Sherlock: I’m asking for science.
[John puts his head in his hands.]

John: I have two. Two nominations. One for Supporting and one for Leading. Never for a play though.

Sherlock: Aren’t you going to ask me how many I have?

John: I know how many you have.

Sherlock: You do?

John: Of course I do.

Sherlock: I have three.

John: You needed to have it said on tape, didn’t you.

Sherlock: Maybe.

Audra McDonald: The nominees for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in a Play are: [John puts down his coffee cup as Sherlock grabs his hand] Stephen Boyer, Lend Me a Tenor, John Cariani, Noises Off!, Sherlock Holmes, Macbeth –

John: YES. [His arms fly into the air, bringing Sherlock’s left hand with him. Sherlock blinks at the television and slowly begins to smile] I told you!

Sherlock: Did you? [he turns towards John and crashes his lips against his own]

John: Well, maybe I didn’t say it outright, but I was certainly thinking it.

Audra McDonald: The nominees for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Play are: Nina Arianda, Noises Off!, Frances McDormand, Little Castles, Mary Morstan, A Streetcar Named Desire –

[John stops kissing Sherlock and turns toward the television]

John: Well that was expected.

Sherlock: Was it?”

John: Don’t be a snot.

[Sherlock grins and places another kiss on John’s head]

Audra McDonald: The nominees for Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Play are:

[Sherlock grabs John and pulls him back up to sitting by his t-shirt]

Audra McDonald: Brian d’Arcy James, Lend Me a Tenor –

Sherlock: Hold still.

John: I am holding still.

Sherlock: No, you’re not. You’re twitching.

Audra McDonald: James Moriarty, A Streetcar Named Desire -
Sherlock/John: Fuck.

Audra McDonald: And John Watson, Macbeth.

...

John: Holy shit.

Sherlock: I KNEW IT.

John: Holy SHIT.

[Sherlock pounces on John, knocking them both off the couch. The camera shakes for a moment, before tumbling off the television. John manages to pull himself away from Sherlock who dives for his neck instead.]

John: We are NOT recording this.

[Sherlock laughs and reaches out toward the camera.]

Sherlock: Spoilsport.

[The screen goes black.]

Chapter End Notes

- Unless you're working in a very small theatre, stage managers usually call a show from somewhere onstage, whether it be just in the wings or above the stage so they can see everything happening. If it's a smaller theatre, a stage manager might call it from the back of the house behind the audience.
- Cipriani 42nd St. is a real place and it's gorgeous. Google it if you don't believe me.
- Audra McDonald really does have six Tony Awards. She's a beast.
- Danny Burstein is an incredible musical theatre actor. If John had to lose to someone, I'd be okay with him losing to Danny.
- All of the other nominees are real people, with the exception of Moriarty and Mary.
Let Slip the Dogs of War

Chapter Summary

It’s moments like these that make Greg feel like a headmaster rounding up his naughty schoolchildren.

“Sherlock, no! Put that down!” He snatches the award out of his actor’s hand and places it back on the table before anyone notices it’s gone missing.

“What? I might win it anyway. I was merely checking its weight and trying to determine whether I’d make John carry it home.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch’s voice
Cry “Havoc!” and let slip the dogs of war.”
- Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene i

The Veuve Clicquot makes the orange juice fizz as Irene fills the flute to the brim and sits back, bringing the phone to her ear.

It’s 8:36am, her only client has been a Tony nominee for all of seven minutes and, frankly, Sherlock should be grateful she waited for John’s category to be announced before dialing.

“Hello?” Sherlock answers a moment later, voice muffled against what might be a pillow.

“Congratulations, Nominee.” There’s a curse, a crash and another curse. “Where are you?”

“Where do you think I am?”

“Hi, Irene,” John’s voice chimes in a second later and she grins naughtily.

“Hello, Mr. Best Actor in a Leading Role.”

“Nominee,” he amends.

“For the moment,” is her swift reply. “We’re fielding interview requests left and right. They want your reaction.”

“Well,” Sherlock sighs, “John’s got me half-undressed and there’s now lube all over the floor, so I don’t think this is an opportune moment, unless you’d like the reaction to be decidedly ‘not suitable for work.’”

Irene sighs toward the heavens and takes a large gulp of her mimosa. “You’ll talk to Playbill first, followed by BroadwayWorld and then Theatremania. Your victory sex can wait.”
“I’m not your client,” John replies, sounding a little put out at the delayed gratification.

“I’ve adopted you for the moment,” Irene retorts. “Playbill will be calling in five for you, John, and, Sherlock, in ten for you. Might I suggest you go into separate rooms.”

There’s silence on the other end and she waits, allowing the suggestion to sink in, because they need this moment. This is it – the beginning. The beginning of the hiding, the denying. The battle.

“Right,” John finally murmurs, clearing his throat. “Good call.” There’s more rustling and Irene can only assume (hope) that they’re getting themselves semi-presentable. Or at least no longer mid-coitus.

“This now means you have the Tony Nominee press junket tomorrow. You must be on the third floor of the Marriott Marquis by 11am. Mike and I will be there, as will Greg and Molly. I assume you didn’t catch the rest of the broadcast, but Greg got a nom, as did Sarah and Ryan. And the show got Best Revival.”

“That’s amazing,” John replies while Sherlock grunts something that sounds like approval. It’s hard to tell sometimes.

“Remember, call in five minutes for John and ten for Sherlock.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chorus, and she can only assume (hope) that they’re getting themselves semi-presentable. Or at least no longer mid-coitus.

“Mm,” John begins as he exits the bedroom, letting out an “Aha!” when he finds the device resting on the floor between the couch and the coffee table. No doubt another casualty from Sherlock’s mid-morning, post-nomination tackle.

He’s got what seems to be a million messages as he unlocks the screen and the phone is still buzzing in his palm.

There’s Harry:
If you don’t bring me as your date,
I will never forgive you. xx

Greg:
Well-earned, mate. Couldn’t have
happened to a better person.

Molly: Congratulations, John! I’m so happy for you! xx

Sean: CONGRATULATIONS! I KNEW IT.
Sorry, I’m a shit texter.

Aaron, from A Little Night Music: YES. Drinks soon? So proud of you.

As well as a dozen notes from other actors, designers, and directors he’s worked with over the years, all sending congratulatory remarks along the same lines. And it’s that more than the nomination itself that has him getting choked up in the middle of his living room. It’s the love and pride and genuine happiness that his colleagues seem to have for him, which is as good a prize as any. But the Tony recognition doesn’t hurt either.

He’ll have to send his own notes soon. Certainly to Greg, Sarah, and Ryan and the rest of his former castmates who were nominated this morning. But first –

His phone rings and he holds it a moment, ready to do the third reaction interview of his career. It’s an odd moment, one he certainly wants to share, but when he glances up, Sherlock is slowly closing the bedroom door, heeding Irene’s advice.

“Go ahead,” Sherlock murmurs, eyes full of pride and love, but there’s something else there. Something melancholy. “They’re waiting, John.”

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I know,” Sherlock replies.

The door clicks shut and John hits ‘answer.’

xxxxxx

The underslings and doors of the theatre are already loudly advertising the 6 Tony Award nominations that the show received that morning. Quick work by the marketing team. Even Sherlock has to give them credit.

He smiles at Fred as he goes through the stage door, already a marked departure from his usual entrance, but he’s trying. If only so he can get to his dressing room relatively unnoticeable and unapproachable, but that’s not likely to happen today. Fred immediately stands and grabs Sherlock’s hand, shaking it up and down like he’s trying to dislodge it from its socket.

“Congratulations, Mr. Holmes! We’re all so proud of you,” he gushes.

And Sherlock should shrug him off (would have just a few months ago), but now the thought of people being proud of him leaves him with a feeling he’s not entirely sure he can classify. Embarrassed? Humbled?

Loved?

“Thanks,” he rasps, voice still raw from his morning of talking. “Thanks very much.”
Fred continues to beam, even after Sherlock disappears up the stairs towards the dressing rooms.

He knows what it is to step onstage that first night as a Tony nominee. He’s done it three times before, but there’s something different about this one. The others meant something in that a nomination was validation – proof that he was good at what he did. But this one? It means more than the others combined, because this *production* means more. It brought him to John Watson and, frankly, if he were to never act again, he would consider his career a satisfactory one.

The callboard has been decorated with unnecessary ribbons, signs, and general merriment. He supposes it’s something people do, but he wouldn’t exactly classify it as obligatory. Still, he supposes it’s… nice.

He spares a glance for a polaroid someone had posted from opening (pre-Moriarty). It shows Andrew jumping on John’s back as John laughs up at Sherlock, who has Sean’s arm slung around his shoulder while cranky old Ian photobombs in the back. Truth be told, it’s a great shot, even more so because Ian was the only one actually looking at the camera. The rest were all caught unawares and that was the beauty of it.

Still smiling slightly, he walks by the laminated opening night notes that contain signatures and well-wishes from all of the other shows running on Broadway. The note from *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains a deranged smiley face that he’d prefer not to think about. In fact, Fred might find that the piece of paper has magically disappeared by the end of the day, and he doesn’t think any of his castmates would fault him for that.

“Hey,” he hears behind him and he turns to find John approaching from the other end of the hall. They’ve been staggering their arrivals, but he must have been staring at the notes for longer than he initially thought. “You all right?” he asks as he draws closer, eyebrows pinched in concern.

Sherlock nods and shifts his bag on his shoulder, but John knows him too well by now and follows his gaze to the board of congratulations. He quickly scans the contents before alighting on the message from the cast of *Streetcar*. His eyes narrow and it takes all of a moment for the paper to be ripped from the board.

“Tosser,” he mutters, throwing it in the bin without a second thought as he grabs Sherlock’s hand and places a surreptitious kiss on his knuckles. “This is a good day, and I’ll not let it be spoiled.”

Sherlock smiles and nods, feeling a sudden swell of fondness for the man next to him. It’s been catching him off guard recently, this sudden burst of feeling. He expects it when John is making love declarations and the like, but it’s the little things, like the coffee John leaves by the bedside or the kiss he casually places on his forehead as he passes that really throw Sherlock for a loop.

“You ready?” John asks and for a moment, Sherlock isn’t sure what he’s referring to. The performance? Moriarty? Their relationship? He supposes the answer to all three would be a resounding ‘yes’ as long as John Watson is by his side.

Yes, he knows what it is to make his first entrance as a Tony nominee. And the show that night goes ten minutes over their average running time to account for the applause that rings out the moment he and John first step onstage.

xxxxxx

Molly gazes wide-eyed as she rides the escalator up to the third floor, watching the glass lifts rocket to the floors above her. The hotel is certainly a step above anything she’s stayed in, but she’s used to it by now. This is where the producers put Greg up when he did preproduction on *Macbeth*. 
She’s thankful that Greg is staying in town to workshop a new musical and bringing her along for the ride. She turned down an offer to go back to London because the opportunity to a) be in town for Tony season and b) stay with Greg was too good to pass up. She’s giving more weight to option a) though, because b) fills her with the kind of giddy anxiety seen in schoolgirls confronted with a valentine from their crush.

“Molly!” a voice calls to her right, breaking her from her musings, and she turns to find Mike standing with John in a corner and waving her over.

She bobs and weaves her way through the crowd, trying not to linger too long on any one particular face. They’re all at least familiar if not downright famous, and Molly flusters easily enough. The goal of the day is to not make an arse out of herself in front of Broadway’s finest.

“All right?” she asks once she reaches them and John nods, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“A bit overwhelmed. I should be old hat at this by now, but it never stops being surreal.”

She stands on tiptoes to place a kiss on his cheek. “I hope you never get used to this.”

“Ta, Molly,” he smiles, ears turning pink as he stares at his shoes. Half of the ballroom is covered in step-and-repeats and the other half with rabid journalists calling loudly to one another – and John stares at it all with the kind of fear-filled bravery she imagines gladiators felt moments before stepping into the arena.

Greg arrives a moment later (breaking the tension with a bad joke and a muttered expletive), followed by Irene dragging a surly-looking Sherlock Holmes. His tie matches John’s pocket square, she notices with a smile. And if the way Irene keeps fiddling with it is any proof, the coordination was certainly planned. On her part, at least.

A cheer goes up as Tony host Neil Patrick Harris strikes a pose in front of the gaggle of photographers and her stomach flips.

“Molly, you’re drooling a bit,” Mike teases and Greg seems to ruffle.

“He doesn’t even play for your team.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t admire from afar,” she replies a bit dreamily, watching as Neil disappears behind a sea of microphones.

By all accounts, Molly doesn’t even need to be here, yet Greg insisted. Something about being a ‘calm presence’ and whatnot. And though ‘calm’ is not exactly a word that comes to mind when describing Molly Hooper, she’ll take what she can get. It’s the Tonys. It’s Greg. It’s Neil Patrick Harris. She wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

Through no pre-arranged agreement she’s aware of, Sherlock and John are kept apart throughout the junket, beginning at opposite sides of the admittedly cavernous room of chaos and gradually working their way closer. But even when they finally get together for a photo op, their posture is stiff and manufactured, smiles forced. There’s none of that genuine ease and affability that’s followed them around since Sherlock got his head out of his arse in rehearsal.

“Are they all right?” she asks Mike as he watches from the side.

“Stress,” he murmurs. “I think it’s getting to them. It’s certainly getting to John.”

“I can tell.”
He sighs. “Then so can the press.”

Hm, Molly thinks – perhaps ‘calm’ isn’t a word she’d use to describe any of them.

xxxxxx

John presses his hand firmly against the small of Sherlock’s back, keeping a steady pressure as the cameras flash in front of their eyes. His smile is well-honed by now – no stranger to a red-carpet – but the muscles of his face still feel the fatigue after ten solid minutes of high res-worthy grinning.

“Thanks, gentlemen!” the press wrangler announces and John shakes his head, blinking a few times to clear the spots from his eyes.

“You good?” he asks, turning to Sherlock, hand sliding up his back to rest between his shoulder blades.

“Indeed,” Sherlock blinks, adjusting his own features as he rubs at his jaw. “I didn’t realize my external pterygoid was so out of shape.”

“Gesundheit.”

Irene slinks up and immediately links her arms through each of theirs, tugging them away from the throng. “You survived and you actually looked like you were having a decent time, too. Your acting is getting better.”

John barks out a laugh. “Good thing we were just nominated for Tony Awards.”

He watches as Sherlock tugs at his collar, appearing more uncomfortable that he usually does in a bespoke suit. John hopes it’s merely the pressure of the day, but Sherlock’s been quiet since that morning. Since opening, actually, if John is being totally honest with himself. And he knows that’s no coincidence.

If John could rid the world of James Moriarty so Sherlock could take just one breath easier, he would. Speaking of –

John cranes his neck and finds the snake on the other side of the room charming the press with a wide smile and dark eyes. At least someone had the common sense to keep the Macbeth and Streetcar casts separated. He feels like he’s wandered into a production of West Side Story and the Jets are at it with the Sharks.

Moriarty catches his eye across the room and winks. John’s hand clenches at his side. He knows which cast would be the Sharks.

Thankfully, Sherlock is too busy arguing with Irene to notice the exchange. Mike, however, is more observant and steps in front of John, effectively blocking Moriarty from view.

“Not worth it,” he murmurs.

John nods and watches Sherlock wildly gesticulate, now too far away to hear what he and Irene are bickering about. It’s probably for the best. He thinks it has something to do with Sherlock’s posture. And thinking back on it, for someone with normally impeccable bearing, Sherlock spent a majority of the day hunched over as if braced for a blow. And that gets John thinking…

Sherlock is loving and affectionate when they’re alone and his usual snarky self when in company, but there are times when he thinks John isn’t looking that the façade falls away and the unease shines
through.

Just the thought of it is enough to give John pause as he watches Greg wrap up his final interview and make his way towards them. Sherlock and Irene seem to settle as Mike gently takes John’s elbow and turns him away from the crowd. Away from Jim Moriarty’s calculating and unnerving gaze.

“Save me,” Greg mutters as he approaches and Irene spins around, grabbing his arm.

“Oh! I’m having a gathering at my apartment after the show tonight,” she blurts out, abandoning the argument.

“I asked for salvation, not mass destruction.”

“I’ll make sure everyone is hydrated enough to ensure no hangovers by your 8pm curtain tomorrow,” Irene promises as John snorts.

“By 8pm? Sounds like quite the party.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Sherlock check his watch and his stomach gives a rumble. It must be going on noon. They have an hour until they should be at the theatre for the 2pm matinee.

“Lunch?” Sherlock asks and John smiles.

“Starving.”

“I suppose the rest of us aren’t invited?” Greg drawls.

“Nope,” Sherlock responds before John can answer, popping the ‘p’ as he grabs John’s sleeve and leads him from the room.

He ignores the feel of Moriarty’s gaze on them as they leave, holding his breath down the escalator and through the lobby, until they enter the midtown sun once more.

xxxxxx

_Celebratory Tony drinking at my apartment post-show.
Be there or be a loser.
_xo Irene_

Sherlock raises an eyebrow as they pass the invitation written on a cocktail napkin and pinned to the callboard with a lipstick kiss on the corner. Typical.

“Notice she didn’t leave her address.”

“You know where she lives, right?” John asks and Sherlock freezes in the middle of the hall.

“I’m sure it’s somewhere in my mind palace.”

He sees John fondly shake his head and pull out his phone to, no doubt, text Irene for confirmation.

Sherlock will deny until his dying day that ‘adorable’ is a word that exists in his vocabulary, but as John’s tongue sticks out between his lips while he slowly texts with his thumbs, ‘adorable’ seems to be an incredibly apt description.

“She’s at 42nd between 9th – ”
“And 10th!” he yells, cutting John off. “See? I remembered.”

“Or, 10 comes after 9, so by process of elimination…”

“Don’t ruin this for me, John.”

John smiles and sneaks a glance around before standing on his toes and pressing a kiss to Sherlock’s lips. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” he whispers.

Sherlock marvels at the fact that no matter how casual or quick or sloppy a kiss with John Watson is, it still makes his heart skip a beat – as cliché and soppy and un-Holmes-like as that sounds.

John smiles and tosses a “Goodnight!” to Fred as they exit the stage door – and Sherlock doesn’t ever think he’ll get used to the cacophony of noise that greets him when they hit the sidewalk. The screams and cheers and overall geniality are usually more John’s thing than his, but being in John’s general vicinity seems to be doing wonders for his likeability.

He manages a smile and heads toward the end of the barricade, patting his pockets and glancing up to find John already holding a sharpie out for him. A few young women “awww” and he rolls his eyes, but signs the Playbills anyway. They compliment his performance and he tries to remember to thank them. It’s what John would do.

After about ten or fifteen minutes, they eventually escape. Sean and Andrew help by yelling, “Come on, slackers!” from down the block.

“John, we’re being summoned.”

“So I hear,” John wryly replies, much to the amusement of the crowd still gathered.

They wave goodbye to the masses and jog to catch up with their castmates. Well, John jogs. Sherlock strides. It’s a short walk to Irene’s and Sherlock tries to remember the last time he was actually in his agent’s flat. Well before production began on Macbeth. She could have redecorated the entire thing and he wouldn’t even know. And when did he start caring about stuff like this? It’s entirely unnerving.

But not as unnerving as a party in full-swing on the 38th Floor of his agent’s midtown flat.

“This was a horrible mistake,” he mutters, attempting to turn around at the door before John grabs him around the waist and shoves him over the threshold.

Greg is holding court in the living room on a modern-looking sofa that can’t be comfortable, Kevin is playing beer pong with the rest of the ensemble on Irene’s dining room table, one of the tech guys has installed a disco ball hanging from the ceiling, and Sally is downing vodka like it’s water.

All in all, it looks like something out of Dante’s Inferno – not entirely unexpected when referring to Irene Adler.

Which is why, two hours later, he’s sinking into the couch (that’s surprisingly more comfortable that he initially anticipated) and nursing what he’s pretty sure is his fourth glass of Malbec. Or fifth.

John isn’t much better – he leans back far enough against the arm of the sofa that when he tips his wine to his lips and a bit dribbles over the side, it runs down his neck like a purple marker, coming to pool in the hollow of his throat. Sherlock stares at it, using every ounce of his considerable self-restraint not to lick it up.
“Don’t do that,” John murmurs, nudging him with his toes.

“Do what?”

“Look at me like you want to devour me. It’s incredibly distracting.”

“Mmm,” he hums, smiling and squeezing John’s ankle which rests on his thigh. “Maybe I want to devour you.”

“Oi! No shagging on the upholstery!” Irene yells from the kitchen, balancing a martini in each hand and pointing one in their general direction.

Sherlock lifts up his hands, holding them up innocently as John nearly rolls off the couch in laughter. He’s not one for public displays of affection, but the cast have proven themselves to be trustworthy. Even Sherlock recognizes that fact, despite his considerable distrust of the human population at large. This is a safe space.

If a rambunctious one.

“Shall we play a game?” Sean asks.

“Cluedo?” John suggests.

“What the hell is Cluedo?” comes a chorus of voices from the living room.

“You actually think I own Cluedo?” Irene sneers.

“What the hell is Cluedo?” Andrew groans.

“You know, someone gets murdered and you have to figure out the murderer, weapon, and location,” Molly explains and Sean snorts.

“Um, yeah, we just call that ‘Clue.’”

“Absolutely not!” Greg suddenly bellows from across the room. “I played with Sherlock once and I won’t allow my friends to make the same mistakes I have! As your director, I simply cannot lead you astray like that.”

“I’m not that bad,” Sherlock replies, nearly pouting.

“Yes you are,” John teases. “We played poker once and you kicked my arse seven ways from Sunday.”

“Well, for someone who essentially lies for a living, you’re very bad at bluffing.”

“The Tony nominating committee would beg to differ.”

“I’m gonna vomit,” Sean groans. “Someone deal the cards.”

John moves (falls) to the floor and Sherlock scoots forward, letting him lean in between his legs, bracketing him with his knees.

“Deal me in. And no backseat playing from you,” John instructs with a slight slur, attempting to jab Sherlock in the chest and getting his nose instead.

Sherlock crosses his arms and huffs. “Oh, so you expect to lose this game. I see. Not how I usually
go about it, but to each his own.”

The hand nudging Sherlock’s shoulder moves and John threads his fingers through those curls, pulling him down into a kiss. “Tosser.”

“Quite.”

“Ugh,” Irene groans as she steps over them with a bowl of popcorn. “You’re not invited to the next party.”

He’d feel somewhat smug about finally managing to kill Irene with treacly sweetness if the entire rest of the cast hadn’t chorused “Seconded” a moment later.

xxxxxx

The Outer Critics Circle Award Nominations as well as the Drama League Awards are announced the following morning over glasses of Alka-Seltzer and bottles of painkillers, phone calls are made to incredibly cranky people, and by the time the OCC Awards actually roll around, Greg wants to kill absolutely everyone.

It’s moments like these, in particular, that make him feel like a headmaster rounding up his naughty schoolchildren.

“Sherlock, no! Put that down!” He snatches the award out of his actor’s hand and places it back on the table before anyone notices it’s gone missing.

“What? I might win it anyway. I was merely checking its weight and trying to determine whether I’d make John carry it home.”

John flips him off and Greg claps a conciliatory hand on his shoulder.

Sherlock seems to be in rare form tonight, which usually guarantees that Greg will be drinking more than usual. Luckily, they’re in Sardi’s – an old school New York restaurant that certainly knows its liquor and he has John now to buffer Sherlock’s more inappropriate tendencies. It also helps that they’re getting a bit of free publicity considering their marquee is just down the block.

They settle on the first floor at the round tables that have been set up. It’s a far cry from Radio City, but it still matters. Mike had to fly back to London so Irene is pulling double-duty, straightening John’s hair while fussing with Sherlock’s tie. She’s like a harried mum trying to keep her boys in line – a feeling Greg can sympathize with.

The ceremony is long and a little bit tedious, lacking the pomp and circumstance of the Tonys or even the Drama Leagues. As they get to Greg’s category, Sherlock has already torn his napkin into pieces and built a miniature Parthenon, while John is trying to pace himself through his third glass of scotch. Greg looks down at his own gin and tonic with wonder, trying to remember which number he’s on. The directing nominees are about to be announced and, on the off chance he wins, he’d prefer it if his words actually sounded somewhat like the King’s English.

He’s just ticking off the people he needs to thank in his head, ending with his actors, when Sherlock stands and excuses himself from the table.

“Where are you going?” Greg asks, more than a bit hacked off that he’s chosen now to leave.

“Toilet.”
“They’re about to do Greg’s category,” John whispers, reaching to pull him back down, but Sherlock is a wily one, evading his grasp.

“Won’t be a moment.”

“Sherlock –”

“I urinate incredibly quickly, John!”

Greg snorts into his napkin and ducks his head as the surrounding tables glance in their direction.

“The nominees for Outstanding Direction of a Play are…”

xxxxx

The fluorescent lights overhead flicker as the door swings shut behind him, casting the relatively dark circles under his eyes into sharp relief. He’s good at pretending like he’s slept – like he’s been next to John in deep Elysium when John wakes up with a stretch and a lazy smile for the man next to him. But his body is bearing the brunt of the evidence and no amount of fine acting and fake snoring will cover it.

He doesn’t actually have to use the loo – he just needs to put some drops in his red and overly strained eyes. Googling your name and spending hours scouring the articles in the dead of night will do that. But his search proved fruitless.

There are no new articles – no new rumors. Even the gossip about his relationship with John has died down and he wonders if their stiff red carpet appearances have contributed anything to that. He almost hopes so because it would make the awful pretense somewhat worthwhile.

Still…

Moriarty wouldn’t not follow through on a threat. That’s just not how he operates.

Which is why Sherlock isn’t at all surprised a moment later when the door swings back and the man in question steps through, all sinewy, manic energy.

“Evening,” he sing-songs. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Sherlock slides the eye-drops back in his pocket and makes a pretense of washing his hands.

“Your director just won the award. Might want to get out there.”

Sherlock makes the mistake of glancing up in the mirror and meeting Moriarty’s cool, reptilian gaze.

“I’m sure he can make a ‘thank you’ speech without my help.”

“I don’t know – I think he could use a thesaurus every now and then. You can say ‘bloody hell’ only so often.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and denies the fact that he secretly agrees with him. Lestrade could benefit from an expanded verbal repertoire.

“And how are you?” Moriarty asks as he lines himself up with a urinal. “Still standing tall?”

“You’ve already torn me down once,” Sherlock clips as he reaches for a paper towel. “I’d like to think I’ve proven myself to be relatively resilient.”
"Oh, Sherlock," Moriarty laughs, “it’s so sweet that you still think this is all about you.” He finishes and zips up his flies, throwing a dead look over his shoulder. “What about the dear Mr. Watson? Broadway’s Most Likeable Star? What skeletons does he have in his closet?” He heads toward the sinks, ignoring the way Sherlock pales in the mirror.

He’s never cared about the attacks against his character. His past is what it is and it’s not like the public hasn’t had its fair share of it. But John – Sherlock knows what John’s skeletons are (most of them anyway) and he knows that should John’s secrets become common knowledge, well… He’s honestly not sure how that scenario would end.

"Attacking John Watson would be incredibly ambitious of you." He's thankful his voice comes out steady, because his insides are wound tighter than a diva on opening night.

"Would it? He seems relatively unassuming, your king."

"And that's everyone's first mistake about him. Stick with me,” he warns, thankful that his voice remains steady despite the fear clawing its way out of his chest. Please stick with me.

Moriarty stares at him for a moment and Sherlock feels naked. Stripped bare of any emotional armor. He once thought himself impregnable, and though John may be his strength, he is also proving to be his greatest weakness.

"And the Outer Critics Circle Award goes to… Sherlock Holmes."

"They're calling your name, Sherlock."

Sherlock swallows as Moriarty smiles, steps back, and gestures toward the door with a little bow.

"Don't want to keep your audience waiting."

xxxxxx

"Where the hell is he?" Irene hisses as John cranes his neck to glance at the bathroom door.

He's a moment away from dragging Sherlock bodily from the toilet, but just as he stands, the loo door swings back and Sherlock strides out, offering a bashful grin and a small wave, much to the delight of the audience.

His posture is all wrong, though. Tense. Protective. Defensive.

And a second later, as Moriarty exits the toilet after him, John knows why.

"Son of a bitch," he mutters, clocking Moriarty's movements as he heads back to the Streetcar table with a smug smile on his face.

John catches Mary's eye as she glances worriedly between them. He barely offers her a passing thought, though, as his gaze finds Sherlock once more, stepping up to the podium and taking the award he had jokingly threatened to steal a mere hour ago.

"Um, hello," Sherlock begins, clearing his throat. "Sorry about that." He nods to the gents and the crowd laughs. "I suppose I should start out by thanking my agent, Irene Adler."

"Damn right," Irene murmurs, which eases the knot in John's gut for a moment.

"Most of the good career choices I've made seem to be her doing and this is no different."
"Wow," she whispers and John assumes such adulation is not the norm in Sherlock's speeches.

"I must also thank Greg Lestrade for sticking by me through the trying times, which, let's be honest, seem to be the only times we've shared. But he's always said 'yes' when my name's come up and that's more than I can say about most people. So, Greg, thank you. And yes, I know you're shocked I got your name right just now. I've been practicing."

John chuckles along with the rest of the table as he watches the man he loves accept a well-deserved award. He rests his elbow on the table and his cheek in his hand, trying to check the absolutely love-sick expression on his face but it can't be helped. And even his considerable acting chops can't assist him in hiding.

"The cast – I also have to thank the cast..."

"Bloody hell, he's never thanked a cast," Irene breathes, downing the rest of her martini as if this were all a dream, and it might disappear at any given moment.

"Everyone's been wonderful and patient and... forgiving, but there's one person in particular that I have to single out," Sherlock continues, eyes flicking to the Streetcar table for the briefest of moments. "John Watson."

Applause breaks out across the room and John blushes, ducking his head as Irene grabs him around the neck and places a smacker on his cheek.

"John was not exactly the first name that came to mind when casting Shakespeare, but he quickly proved himself to be the most capable in the room."

John swallows hard and pinches the tablecloth between his thumb and forefinger just to have something to grip.

"He's been the leader that our company needed and the best friend an arsehole like me could have. John, I'm incredibly grateful for you both in a professional and personal sense and I appreciate everything you've done for me. Most wouldn't have stuck around past the meet and greet. So thank you." He smiles the smile that's reserved only for lazy mornings in bed and the breath catches in John's throat. "I'm sure there are others I've forgotten – "

"The Outer Critics!" Greg calls and the room chuckles.

"Like the people giving me this award. Yes, thank you to the Outer Critics," Sherlock amends looking chastened as he raises his award. "Thanks very much indeed."

He scurries off the stage and weaves his way back to the table where he's greeted with hugs and applause. John isn't sure what he expected from a Sherlock Holmes speech but it certainly wasn't that. That was genuine and sincere and funny, but almost a little bit desperate. There were things Sherlock needed to say and couldn't, but he tried his best to get them out. And frankly, John thinks he did a bloody brilliant job.

"Tosser," Greg grumbles, tackling Sherlock in a hug. "I forgive you for missing my speech."

"Congratulations," John murmurs, well aware of their audience as he pulls Sherlock to him. "Well-deserved." And if his lips ghost across the taller man's ear, then so be it. "All right?"

"I just won an award. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Sherlock, I saw Moriarty," John replies as he pulls away. "What did he say?"
"Nothing of consequence."


John holds his breath – not that he expects to win, but it's just habit by now – and Sherlock grips his knee beneath the table.

"And the Outer Critics Award goes to… James Moriarty for *A Streetcar Named Desire*."

"Fuck," Irene blurts out as John exhales loudly.

He manages a smile and claps as gracious losers are trained to do, but Sherlock's hands remain firmly still, one palm gripping John's thigh and the other balled up in a fist in his lap.

"Hey, it's fine," he murmurs, leaning down and brushing his nose against Sherlock’s jaw in a way he hopes looks accidental.

“No it’s not,” Sherlock bites out and John leans back, studying his face.

“Sherlock, what happened in the bathroom?”

"Leave it alone, John.” His palm leaves John’s thigh and John can’t explain the feeling of deprivation that hits him like a truck.

“Gosh, wow,” Moriarty gushes and John feels ill.

He doesn’t consider himself to be a sore loser, but he’d prefer anybody to Moriarty.

“This is so unexpected.” Moriarty goes through the usual thanks and John tunes him out (the ringing in his ears helps) but it’s when he thanks “old friends and new,” with a pointed glance at the *Macbeth* table that John’s blood pressure really starts to spike. But his muted, seething anger is nothing compared to the rage that he can feel thrumming through every fiber of Sherlock’s being.

Sherlock at least as the good sense to wait until Moriarty is finished speaking before getting up and heading for the door, leaving his fellow *Macbeth* team staring after him in confusion. Irene begins to stand, but John waves her down, standing himself and smiling at a few fellow nominees as he makes his way out of the restaurant and onto 44th Street.

“What the hell was that?” he asks as he gets to the pavement to find Sherlock pacing to the curb and back. “You just did a complete 180!”

“I said to leave it,” the other man spits and John’s had enough.

"What happened to doing this together, huh? Bracing for battle and all that? Were you just blowing smoke up my arse or do you truly think I wouldn’t want to be with you every step of the way?"

“I just – need some air.”

“We’re outside.”

“Space then!” Sherlock roars. “I need space!”

The oxygen leaves John’s lungs like he’s been punched. “From me?”
A pained look crosses Sherlock’s face and his voice cracks as he says, “From everything.”

John steps back, ignoring the pain in his chest as Sherlock reaches out for him before thinking better of it and letting his hand drop. “Right.”

“John.”

“No. It’s fine. Valid point.” He runs his hand through his hair. “You know, if we’re supposed to be keeping this under wraps then I suppose fighting in the middle of the sidewalk is not exactly conducive to secrecy. I should…” he nods and clears his throat, “I should get back in there.”

His heart is positively thunderous in his chest, ricocheting off his ribs so hard, he genuinely thinks he might be having a heart attack.

Sherlock opens his mouth as if he wants to say something, but aborts at the last moment, staring at the pavement and backing away from John.

“All right then,” John murmurs, heading towards the restaurant and yanking the door open once more – and bumping into the weasel from the Post on his way in. Fantastic.

“Ah, John, sorry about the loss,” he says, catching John’s arm and preventing him from passing through the lobby.

“Cheers.” He’s really not in the mood to speak to anyone, let alone a member of the press.

"While I have you – what exactly is the nature of your relationship with Sherlock Holmes? Things looked pretty heated out there."

“Just two castmates having a conversation,” he replies, trying to catch Irene’s eye on the other side of the room.

“Did he start doing drugs again?”

John stops in the middle of the foyer and levels him with a glance. “I should hit you for that.”

“Is that a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’?”

“It’s a ‘piss off.’”

He shrugs off the reporter’s arm and steps around him, trying to school his face before he enters the room once more. But one look at Greg and Irene proves he’s failed spectacularly.

And because John doesn’t look back, he never sees Sherlock’s staring at him through the window, face crumbling the minute he turns and heads toward the marquee of the stage they share.

xxxxxxxx

Macbeth a Big Winner at Outer Critics Circle Awards, But Moriarty Takes Home Top Prize

Broadway’s John Watson Loses the Outer Critics Circle Award to James Moriarty, Threatens Reporter

Tony Nominee John Watson’s Military Past

From Farah to Fosse: Tony-Nominee John Watson’s Afghanistan History
John slams the toilet seat up just in time to empty his breakfast into the bowl, stomach heaving as his eyes water.

It’s out there. All of it. Every attack, every fight, every bullet, every empty magazine, every life saved, every life lost. His finest moments and his darkest nightmares made public for the world to see.

He heaves one more time and blindly swats at the handle, resting his head against the cool porcelain as the toilet flushes.

He needs Sherlock. He wants him by his side, but Sherlock needed space. And he knows that whatever is going on has to do with Moriarty. Hell, this is Moriarty. John wasn’t naïve enough to think he was immune to the psycho’s machinations, but he had at least hoped that Sherlock would be by his side when the guillotine fell.

Somewhere in the apartment, his phone is ringing. He hopes it’s Mike, but really, it’s anyone’s guess. A secret military past would certainly up his text/email count.

He stumbles into the living room to find the phone on the table, Mike’s name blessedly scrolling across the screen. He picks it up and ignores the Google Alert notifications that continue to make the device vibrate in his hand.

“I know what you’re going to say,” he mutters before even a ‘hello’ is said and Mike sighs heavily on the other end.

“I really don’t think you do.”

“John!” Harry’s voice echoes through the door, followed by three fierce knocks. “John, let me in!”

“Fuck, Harry’s here.”

“John, I need you to listen to me,” his agent pleads and that alone gives John pause. Mike never pleads.

“Look, Mike, we knew it would get out there eventually.”

“I’m not calling about Afghanistan, John. It’s the video.”

“What video?” he asks monotonously as he drifts toward the door.

“I saw the headlines, John. Please open the door,” Harry begs. John’s hand remains hovering over the knob.

“The Tony morning video.”

“Yeah?” he says, tongue feeling thick and slow in his mouth.

“Someone released it online. You and Sherlock… It’s out there, John.”

Chapter End Notes
- Broadway shows do send opening night notes to every other show on Broadway. It's a bit of a tradition. The stage manager will post pieces of paper with well-wishes for every upcoming opening on the call board, so actors can sign them on their way in. And on a particular show's opening night, all of the notes get laminated, curried over, and usually taped along a wall where they remain for the run.
- The Tony Nominee Press Junket happens the day after the nominations are announced. It usually takes place in a midtown hotel; sometimes the Paramount, sometimes the Marriott Marquis in Times Square.
- Neil Patrick Harris has hosted the Tony Awards a total of four times so far. And he's won an Emmy for three out of those four gigs.
- Sardi's is a famous New York restaurant on 44th St, known for the caricatures of Broadway actors that adorn its walls. It also features prominently in The Muppets Take Manhattan. If you haven't seen that film, you're missing out.
- The Tony Awards are held every year at Radio City Music Hall (except for the two years when Cirque du Soleil took over and the Tonys moved to the much smaller Beacon Theatre on the Upper West Side).
- Christian Borle has won two Tony Awards. One for Peter and the Starcatcher and most recently for Something Rotten! He was also on the short-lived TV show Smash.
“Something happened last night. Sherlock left early. Fuck,” Irene mutters to herself.
"John didn’t tell you?"

“We haven’t exactly had time to discuss anything beyond ‘sit down, breathe, I’ll make tea.’”

Chapter Notes

I’ve broken this chapter into two parts because it was getting beastly. More will happen in the next chapter, I promise!

“..."We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes? Let be.”

- Hamlet, Act 5, Scene ii

Harry raises her fist to bang on the door once more, worrying that she might have left John’s spare key in her other bag. But before she can make contact against the wood, it swings back and her brother stands there looking pale and drained, phone hanging limply in his hand.

But perhaps the thing that scares her most is that her older brother – the brother that’s seen alcoholic fathers and unwinnable wars and hostile New York Times reviews – looks vulnerable. Frightened, even.

“God, John,” she whispers, stepping forward and wrapping him in her arms, ignoring the fact that his phone clatters to the hardwood floor.

He’s shaking slightly and so she holds him tighter, cupping the back of his head the way he used to do whenever she had a nightmare as a child. His hair still sticks every which way, having just rolled out of bed, she can only assume. He also smells slightly like vomit, which she honestly can’t fault him for.

“Come on,” she murmurs. “I’ll make you a cuppa.” She pulls away and presses her palms to his cheeks, wiping a stray tear from his skin. The last time she saw John cry was at their mother’s funeral nearly twenty years ago. He’s been the shoulder to cry on for her so many times – it’s only right that she return the favor.

She kicks the door closed and picks up his phone, ushering him to the couch and pushing him down
against the cushions. He goes more than willingly, staring at the coffee table in front of him like a man facing the gallows.

“They have the video,” he says after a moment and she freezes halfway to the kitchen. Partly because she didn’t quite hear him and partly because she thinks she did and she desperately wants to be wrong.

“What?”

“They have the video.” His voice is hoarse, breaking on the final word. “The one I showed you from Tony morning.”

Her stomach plummets, all thought of tea forgotten. “How the hell did they get that?”

John shrugs and it’s so defeated that her heart clenches. “I wiped the camera before I gave it to Broadway.com. Uploaded the video to my computer. Emailed it to Sherlock so he’d have a copy. Someone must have hacked in.”

“Fuck,” she whispers.

“Yep,” he replies. “Afghanistan and Sherlock. Quite a start to the week, wouldn't you say?” His joke is hollow, though, echoing around the quiet apartment.

“Well that calls for whiskey,” she states. “And it’s Monday, which means I won’t have to worry about you taking a header off the stage tonight.”

He smiles and she internally pumps her fists in victory as she heads for the kitchen and puts the kettle on, snagging the bottle of Jack Daniels from the liquor cabinet. As the water boils, she leans against the doorjamb separating the kitchen and the living room and watches as her brother falls further into his catatonic state.

“John?” she asks after a moment, almost hating to break the silence.

“Hm?” He doesn’t glance up at her.

“Does Sherlock know?”

His phone picks that precise moment to ring and Irene Adler flashes across the screen. And though John might have been the rugby player, Harry held her own at field hockey, and she snatches the phone off the table before he can even make a move for it.

“Irene?”

“Harry? Shit, it must be bad if you’re there,” the agent breathes and Harry spares another glance for John looking hopeful and like he’s trying not to look hopeful at the exact same time.

“It’s not great,” she replies, trying to be diplomatic as she moves back into the kitchen to finish making tea. “How’s Sherlock? Does he know?” There’s silence on the other end and Harry pauses, spoon hovering over the mug. “Irene?”

“I can’t get a hold of him.”
“Pardon?”

“He won’t pick up his phone and he’s not at his apartment. And I know that because I’m standing in the middle of his living room.” There’s a heavy breath that crackles over the phone. “I was actually hoping he was with John.”

“He’s not. Which was a bit surprising. I was expecting to burst through the door and find them half naked.”

“Something happened last night. Sherlock left early. Fuck,” she mutters to herself. “John didn’t tell you?”

“We haven’t exactly had time to discuss anything beyond ‘sit down, breathe, I’ll make tea.” She puts the milk back in the fridge and nudges it closed with her hip, balancing the mugs in her hands as she holds the phone between her shoulder and ear. “But maybe give Mike a call? I think John hung up on him.” She asks if that’s true with a raise of her eyebrow and John sheepishly takes the mug from her, giving her all the answer she needs. “Yeah, he definitely hung up on him.”

“Okay, just… keep him off the internet today.”

“No problem there.” Harry takes a seat on the other side of the couch and tucks her legs up under her. “And keep me posted on the other thing.”

“After I kill him, I will certainly send him in John’s general direction.”

Harry snorts, welcoming the much needed levity. “Thanks.” She clicks the phone off and smells her tea, triple checking that the mug she handed John was the alcoholic one.

"She doesn't know where he is, does she." It's not a question.

Harry stares at his profile until he turns and makes eye contact with her.

"You always were a shit liar."

"That's because you did all of my lying for me. 'Where's Harry?' 'Oh at Katie's house.' 'Did Harry come home last night?' 'Oh yeah, but she had to get to work early this morning. You just missed her." She nudges him with her toes as she takes a sip. "Why lie when I had my big brother covering for my sorry arse every day?"

John smiles and she winks as he stares down at the coffee table and the phone that keeps vibrating across its surface. The screen is lighting up with Google Alerts and text messages and emails, creating such an annoying symphony that she reaches over and powers it down.

"That's quite enough of that."

"I should find Sherlock." John makes a move to stand and Harry pulls him back down.

"Sherlock's a big boy. He can handle himself."

"Sometimes I'm not sure," he murmurs with a haunted look in his eyes and she wonders what on earth happened last night to make her confident brother so insecure.
"Look, there are very few things I'm sure of. One: I'm an alcoholic. Two: Sherlock loves you. and Three: Eleven was the best Doctor."

"Oi! Tennant all the way," he cries, face lighting up with indignation.

"There he is," she says with a smile and he glares when he realizes she was just goading him.

"Speaking of, the new season of Doctor Who was just released on Netflix. I say we order in and don't leave this couch except for food and loo breaks for the rest of the day."

"Don't you have work?"

She shrugs and pulls up a food delivery app on her phone. "Big brothers take priority to sodding jobs." She busies herself with his remotes, but her ears pink when she realizes he's staring at her with something akin to wonder. It takes her less time than usual to crumble under the scrutiny. "What the hell, John? It's not normal for a single entertainment unit to come with this many remotes!"

He takes them out of her hand with a smile that slowly starts to fade as he pulls up his Netflix account. "It's just a mess," he sighs, allowing her to snatch the remote back and pull up Doctor Who.

"So the universe knows you're bisexual. It's not the end of the world."

"That's not it - it's... That was private, you know? A private moment between me and Sherlock."

"That you recorded."

"Because I wanted to remember it! For us and no one else! My recording it isn't permission for it to be shared with the world!" he roars and she smiles.

"There's the fire I was looking for. Thank Christ. I thought you'd gone soft on me. Now budge up, you're hogging the couch."

xxxxxx

8:04am: "Sherlock, there's been some news. I need you to call me."

8:13am: "Sherlock, call me back right this instant."

8:27am: "I am not kidding, Sherlock Holmes."

8:39am: "William Sherlock Scott Holmes, I will drop you as my only client. I can find better paychecks elsewhere."

9:07am: "Don't do this to John. Please, please don't do this to him."

xxxxxx

Irene hangs up the phone and glances at the list of unanswered out-going calls. She's left five voicemails so far and that's not counting the calls she disconnected the moment the machine kicked in.

The apartment is a mess, but not the organized chaos Sherlock usually leaves it in. The stack
of *Macbeth* criticism has been knocked over and there's a half-drunk mug of coffee on the table. She checks to see if it's still warm but it's tepid at best. Still, that means he was here this morning.

Her phone rings a moment later and she finds herself staring at the name of a Holmes, but not the one she's looking for.

"Where is he?" she demands in lieu of a greeting and she gets a weary sigh in reply.

"If I knew, do you think I'd be calling you?" Mycroft drawls.

"I'd like to think you'd at least have the decency to let me know my only client has not wandered onto the subway tracks. Don't you have CCTV on him at all times?"

"Sadly, the United States of America is less inclined to let me hack their systems to keep track of my wayward younger brother."

"Oh I just assumed you implanted a chip in his brain or something," she spits out, taking another turn around the room for any evidence she might have missed.

"Miss Adler, this has the potential to be very bad."

"I know that," she whispers.

"The last time his private life was made this public - lies or not - he ended up in a facility with a depression so severe, I do not exaggerate when I say I worried for his life."

"I remember," she snaps. "Don't act like you were the only one there picking up the pieces, Mycroft Holmes."

"I... apologize," he murmurs and her eyebrows fly up. A Holmes apologizing? Miracles do exist. "I did not mean to imply you do not care for him," he continues. "I know you do. I'm getting on the next flight out of London. I should land by early evening."

Irene pinches the bridge of her nose and stares down at her blue Manolo Blahnik's. "I'm at his apartment now. He was here this morning. Evidence of his hasty departure is all over the place. Including..." she steps into the bedroom and pulls the laptop that's been discarded on the bed into her lap, "... a page open to *The Post*'s article on John's military past and another tab with a message board talking about the video. Lovely."

"Running is not like him. He doesn't spook easily."

Irene is silent for a moment, eyeing the extra toothbrush in the holder by the sink next to Sherlock's. "But this is John."

"I know," Mycroft breathes. "I'll see what I can dig up in the city's surveillance. I'm owed a few favors."

"I have no doubt," she chuckles, sobering slightly as he catches sight of a t-shirt from John's med school days hanging from an open drawer.

"And how is our dear Mr. Watson?"
"I just got off with his sister. She's with him."

"Good. I'll reach out to express my support," he replies right before he clicks off.

And Irene supposes that's about as sentimental as he gets.

12:07pm:
Please don't doubt my brother's feelings for you. - M.H.

12:09pm:
Is this the elusive Mycroft Holmes? How'd you get this number? This is John's sister btw. I'm screening his phone.

12:13pm:
Don't ask silly questions. - M.H.

12:17pm:
Don't be a tosser. And tell your brother to get his fucking act together. - H.W.

6:58pm:
Per the shitty advice of my sister, I've left you alone all day. But I'm going through withdrawal and she's in the loo. PS Harry got me drunk.

7:37pm:
I just tried you. Will you answer your phone?

8:09pm:
Where are you? Are you safe?

9:12pm:
Sherlock, please call me.

10:11pm:
Come home.

11:33pm:
I love you. Please.

xxxxx

Greg has rearranged his workshop rehearsal so he can attend another one of Irene's "Situation Room" meetings. He feels slightly guilty about ignoring his current musical cast, but one of his leading men is M.I.A. and the other is being dissected in the press. He can't be faulted for being a bit distracted. Getting on the phone with Irene, Mike, Martha, and Molly while simultaneously trying to dodge calls from reporters asking for a pull quote has been quite a feat of plate-spinning.

Molly's waiting for him outside of Martha's upper east side apartment with a latte (bless her) and an anxious expression on her face. He imagines his own features resemble something quite similar.

"Hi," she murmurs and he places a kiss on her cheek.

"Hi," he mutters, taking the latte with a grateful smile. "Cheers, Molls."

"How's John?"

Greg shrugs, feeling nauseous all of a sudden. "I haven't seen him. His sister was with him yesterday."

"Good." Molly nods and presses her lips together, squinting in the afternoon sun over towards the trees of the park. "Sisters are good... And still no word from Sherlock?"

Greg slowly shakes his head, trying to affect a nonchalant smile for Molly's sake. "Nope. But I'm sure we're about to get an earful on his potential locations." He nods towards the black car pulling up in front of the building.

Mycroft Holmes steps out a moment later, trusty umbrella hooked over his arm, despite the presence of a perfect New York spring day.

"Greetings," he murmurs with a little head bow, striding past them and into the lobby, leaving them to hurry in his wake.

It's a tense lift ride to say the least and Martha had to go and live on the top floor. The door slides open with a ding and both men wait, allowing Molly to exit first. Martha Hudson is on them in an instant, flailing her arms and kissing their cheeks and basically fretting in a rather spectacular fashion.

Greg untangles himself from her clutches, sacrificing Molly to bear the brunt of Martha's worries as he makes his way over to Irene, who (somewhat shockingly) does not have a drink in her hand.

"Hey."

"Hello," she replies, tearing her gaze away from the view to offer him a small smile. And that right there is evidence enough of the general state of things. There's no quip, no snarky reply. Just a sad greeting in a defeated tone.

"No word then?"

"No. And I've checked all of the usual places. Even some unusual ones." She stares at a horse and buggy making its way into the park. "Greg, I think he thinks this is his fault."
And Greg nods because his line of thinking has been much the same. Not that Greg agrees with the notion, but he can understand how Sherlock might think that if he'd never come into John's life, then Moriarty never would have gotten his claws in him, and his secrets would have remained just that.

"I have my men scouring CCTV footage," Mycroft says from behind them. "I'll let you know if anything turns up."

"I thought you couldn't get a hold of the surveillance."

"I can be very persuasive." And even though the man probably hasn't slept in the past 36 hours, his tone is not one to be trifled with.

"I think we're all here now," Martha announces and Greg turns to find that Sally, Mike, and more importantly, John have arrived while he was musing.

And Christ does John look terrible. Face pale, eyes red, hair mussed, clothes disheveled, like he slept in them. But then again, it doesn't look like he got any sleep at all.

They gather in the living room and Greg squeezes John's good shoulder as he passes to take a seat on the couch opposite.

"Before anyone asks, I haven't heard from him," John says, voice rough. "Not for lack of trying though."

"Of course, dear," Martha soothes, leaning forward to pat his hand. "But I do think we have to discuss the possibility that he won't return in time for tonight."

John swallows and nods, but doesn't look up. Greg shares a glance with Sally.

"John, I want you to know this company is behind you 100%. The amount of texts and calls I've gotten this morning from your cast just telling me they've got your back... I've never seen that kind of outpouring. So whatever happens, you've got people in your corner."

"Ta," John manages clenching and unclenching his left fist. "You know, there's a part of me that's just goddamn relieved. I've been tiptoeing around this like every look I give him is going to be picked apart in the press and I can't – I can't do it anymore. And now I guess I don't have to."

Martha reaches over and takes his hand once more.

"I could have lived without Afghanistan, though," he says with a wry smile, bringing some levity to the tense room.

"Do we have Tony voters in tonight?" Greg asks, because if voters are coming, they need to see all of the nominated performances, Sherlock's included.

"Not many," Sally replies. "I spoke to company management this morning. We'll bump them if need be."

Martha glances at Greg and nods, the next question that must be asked hanging heavy in the air. And leave it to John to be the one to ask it.
"How’s Sean’s Lady M?"

Sally clears her throat, looking at John quickly before returning her gaze to the coffee table. “He’s ready.”

Sally's been running understudy rehearsals since just prior to opening, updating Greg on all of their progress. And Sean's been killing it. He's no Sherlock Holmes, but he's close.

"Great," John breathes. "I suppose we'll be doing a put-in today?"

All eyes find Greg and he shifts under the scrutiny.

"It's 11:37am. We'll give Sherlock another hour and then we'll make the call."

xxxxxx

For someone who's all about The Work, you're doing a shit job of showing it today. – Your very pissed off agent

xxxxxx

It's the call most Broadway understudies pray to get and Sean answers it at 1:07 on a Tuesday afternoon.

"There's a good chance you're going on tonight for Sherlock," Sally says, all business, and Sean's inhales sharply.

"Okay," he replies, successfully hiding the lurch his stomach makes. "Put in?"

"3pm. I hope you didn't have plans," she responds dryly and he smiles.

"I was heading to Cabo, but you know, I'm willing to take one for the team."

"You don't know the half of it."

And he supposes she's right - as much as he wants to tear into the role, he knows there's a reason Sherlock was just nominated for a Tony Award.

"How's John?" he blurts out, catching Sally just before she hangs up.

"How would you be?" she quietly asks after a moment and he sighs.

"Sherlock's really peaced out?" She doesn't respond. "Greg texted me. Asked me if I'd seen him."

"Something like that," she replies. "I'll see you at 3pm."

The walk from the 42nd St./Bryant Park subway stop is infinitely more daunting and he swallows hard as he passes the box office, watching as the cast list is switched around inside the lobby:

At this performance, the role of Lady Macbeth, usually played by Sherlock Holmes, will be played by Sean Fagan.
"Fuck me," Sean breathes, pulling open the stage door and offering Fred a salute.

"Knock 'em dead, kiddo," he calls as Sean trudges up the stairs. He stands at the top, ready to make a right towards his dressing room, but John's door is open, so he makes a left instead, finding the man himself sitting at his table, staring at the phone that lays in front of him.

"Hey," Sean murmurs, giving a perfunctory knock.

John glances in the mirror and smiles. It even manages to reach his eyes. "I hear you're my husband for the evening."

And that doesn't sit well with Sean, even though John means it sincerely.

"Still wish it was under different circumstances."

John tilts his head and turns in his chair to look at Sean full-on. "You'll be great tonight."

Sean nods, feeling significantly less sure. Gone is the cocky asshole he usually pretends to be and in his place is someone with a vulnerability he nearly doesn't recognize. But this is the nature of the business and everyone in this building needs him to do his job and do it well. Particularly the man sat in front of him.

"I won't let you down," he finally says and John's soft smile widens.

"I never thought you would."

xxxxx

Sean’s eagerness to please is endearing, but John wishes that he’d stop looking at him like he's about to fall to pieces.

"Shall we?"

They don’t need much rehearsal time. Just a couple of hours to go through the more complicatedly blocked scenes and for Sean and John to get used to one another’s choices. Sean’s interpretation is going to change the way John delivers some things, but John truly doesn’t take any of this into account until they get to Act II, scene 2 – also known as the scene John looks forward to every night.

But now it won’t be Sherlock climbing on his lap and that chemistry - that intimacy - that came so naturally to them will actually have to be worked for. Earned.

He imagines Sean is heavier than Sherlock, but then again, many people are. Sean is two or three inches shorter, but broader. More a footballer’s body than a swimmer’s. Still, it won’t be hard to manhandle him around the bedroom set.

“Gents, you ready?” Greg asks and John nods as Sean holds up a finger.

“Quick sec,” he says as he moves toward John, dropping his voice. “Is there – I don’t –“ he huffs and John tilts his head in confusion. “Look, I know you were shot. Is there anything I can’t touch? I don’t want to hurt you or make you uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” John breathes. “Just… easy on the shoulder. Left one.”

“Gotcha,” Sean replies, turning towards Greg and moving into position. “All good!”
“Sean?” John calls him back.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for asking. I appreciate it.”

“What are husbands for?” is his cheeky reply and John rolls his eyes and gets ready for the start of the scene.

When they get down to it, the rhythm is off. Not in a bad way, but it’s different, as anyone would expect it to be. Sean is gentle as he cups his cheeks and wipes his tears, but the first press of his lips has John’s brain screaming WRONG WRONG WRONG.

But John doesn’t have the luxury to live in his head like this. To compare the contours of Sean to the contours of Sherlock. To wonder where Sean got the scar on the back of his neck and realize he’s never actually seen any scars on Sherlock’s body. Comparing isn’t fair and John has too much that’s not fair in his life at the moment.

When they finish, Greg, Molly and Sally are staring at them with smiles on their faces and hope in their eyes, and John exhales loudly.

They might just pull this off.

xxxxxx

**Playbill.com**

**Sherlock Holmes Out of Tuesday Evening’s Performance of Macbeth**

*The announcement comes hours after a video was released online confirming what Broadway gossips have long since speculated on: that Holmes and his castmate John Watson are in a relationship. A reason for his absence was not given, but we wish him a speedy return.*

xxxxxx

Sally calls the cue for the lights in the house to come up and offers a “good job” to her team on headset.

The curtain call had been appropriately enthusiastic for Sean, but also oddly enthusiastic for John. He’s old hat at this by now, but Sally has a feeling that the audience wanted to show Broadway’s Most Likeable Star a little extra love tonight.

She exits her stage manager perch, rolling her neck to rid it of the kinks that develop over the course of a show. She can’t afford to miss a single beat, and that makes the masseuse she has on retainer all the more worth it.

“Oi!” she calls when Sean enters the hallway and the man turns, a grin the size of Texas on his face.

“Ms. Donovan, it’s a lovely night for Broadway!” he calls as he runs down the hall.

"Don't you dare! You're disgusting!" she cries, but he ignores her and picks her up anyway, spinning her around. “Good job, you lunatic. Now put me down.”

He does so and she wipes the makeup and sweat he got on her hands off on her jeans with a muttered "ew."

John enters the hallway a moment later, wiping his face down with a towel as Nate trails not too far
behind. Closer, actually, than he normally does, as if his charge might suddenly collapse at any given moment. She supposes that's not too far out of the realm of possibility, but Sally knows John Watson is stronger than that.

But not strong enough to face legions of fans waiting at the stage door, apparently. Even war veterans have their limits.

"You up for that?" she asks when he comes down after a quick shower.

John stares at the door for a moment, listening to the cheers, before slowly shaking his head. "No, I don't think so."

"Thought not. Clara's going to sneak you out the back. There's a car waiting. Harry may or may not already be in it."

He chuckles and leans forward to place a kiss on her cheek. Sally isn't one for physical affection, but she smiles and squeezes his arm, feeling an overwhelming fondness for the man in front of her.

"It was a great show tonight."

John smiles tightly. "Ta, Sally."

She watches him go, the slump of his shoulders indicating his general state of mind, and she pulls out her phone to fire a text off to her missing leading man.

You're an idiot.

And you missed a hell of show. she adds, just to be spiteful.

She doesn't get a reply, but then again, she didn't expect one.

xxxxxx

Tell him I'm sorry. - S.H.

Absolutely not. I refuse to do your dirty work for you. Where are you? - I.

Safe. - S.H.

Frankly I wouldn't care if you were in the ER at New York-Presbyterian.

Valid. - S.H.

xxxxxx

John surrenders to Harry's efforts to distract him by binging on the entire Harry Potter film collection (her choice, not his). Clara sticks around for the first two and she's a welcome diversion, but eventually she goes, taking Harry with her and leaving John to watch the films get darker and darker as his mood matches the tone.
His sleep that night is a fitful one and the next day doesn't prove much better. Sherlock misses the matinee performance on Wednesday and John isn't holding his breath for the evening.

He's stopped texting and calling. It's not that he wants to, per se, but his pride and stubbornness are putting up quite the fight. Now all he seems to be feeling is righteous anger. Anger at Sherlock for making him do this alone. Anger at Moriarty for, well, everything. Anger at Mary, just because. He still hasn't ruled her out as his email hacker. She did once know his password and he's honestly not sure if he's changed it since they broke up. He had needed her to log-in for him once because he couldn't remember where his audition was and his phone had died. She very well could have found the video and passed it on. But she's not that vindictive.

Is she?

He pauses on the steps so abruptly, he nearly sends himself arse over teacups. But before he can mull it over for too much longer, Irene magically appears before him holding up a black marker.

"Need this?"

His eyes narrow and she goes for an innocent look, but innocence isn't really her style.

"Come on, John, you have to do the stage door. You didn't last night and it was... conspicuous. It's just the matinee, the crowds will be small."

He'd really rather return to his dressing room and, because he's a glutton for punishment, continue the Harry Potter marathon in between shows, but Irene's got her game face on and John isn't getting out of this even if he was bleeding profusely from the head.

"Fine." He snatches the marker and holds his breath, offering a face of exaggerated fright to Fred as he heads out.

The cheers are positively deafening.

"Whoa, hi," he says sheepishly, not quite expecting that kind of welcome. Certainly not after the press he's received lately. He makes it to a group of older women who're clearly on vacation from somewhere in the south. Their expressions range from excited to sympathetic to pitying to downright lecherous. Definitely from the south.

"John, sweetie, you were fantastic," the first woman says and John smiles, signing her Playbill.

"Thanks very much," he replies, already posing for a selfie with the woman's friend.

"But where's Sherlock?" a woman down the line asks, and John freezes nearly mid-signature.

"Yeah, where's Sherlock?" someone else pipes up from the crowd.

And John manages a smile that deserves a Tony Award all on its own. "Laryngitis."

The crowd moans in sympathy and out of the corner of his eye, he can see Irene give him a look that seems to say, "Way to pull that out of the hat."

"Give him our best!" someone shouts as another voice says, "Oh I'm sure he will," in a tone laced with innuendo.

John's stomach clenches, but then a young woman grabs his arm, face open and earnest. "The video was beautiful. Hilarious and cute and - " but then she's cut off by the boy next to her.
"Hilarious, man. Thanks for sharing it."

And he doesn't have the heart to tell them it was stolen. That those were moments meant to be between him and Sherlock and no one else, but the people in front of him seem so genuinely thrilled for them. Happy for their happiness. And so his smile gets a little looser, his shoulders a little less tense, and by the time he reaches the end of the line and a man shakes his hand, thanking him for his service, John feels downright emotional.

Irene was right. It was good to do the stage door. She's always right and her cat-that-got-the-canary expression proves she knows it.

"Where are you off to now?" someone asks as he reaches for the stage door once more.

"Now? I'm going to sit in my dressing room, order some sushi, and watch Harry Potter."

The crowd laughs and he chuckles along. "You think I'm joking. I'm on Goblet of Fire."

A young girl yells, "That's my favorite!"

"My sister's too. But I think she just fancies the French one." He winks and the girl positively beams, clutching her signed Playbill to her chest yet careful not to wrinkle it.

"Told you," Irene murmurs as he breezes past her and he replies with a "sod off," but it contains no real heat.

"I want in on this Harry Potter action."

Now that surprises him. "Seriously? Irene Adler watches Harry Potter?"

"Well I am British. Isn't it mandatory?"

He snorts and leads her up the stairs, where they're joined by Greg and Molly on their lunch break, followed by Clara, Andrew, and even Sally, who scoffs at every moment of unmitigated optimism.

"Hark! I hear the dulcet tones of John Williams!" Sean cries ten minutes later as he bursts through the door and plops down on the floor next to Clara.

Bowls of popcorn are being passed around and his little room really wasn't meant to hold this many bodies, but John is surrounded on all sides by people who don't care about what guns he's fired, or who he sleeps with, or why on earth he's watching Harry Potter at 5pm on a Wednesday afternoon.

And that makes everything just a bit more bearable.

Chapter End Notes

- A "put-in" is a rehearsal to literally "put in" a new actor if an understudy hasn't gone on in the role yet.
Chapter Summary

John's back is straight, his bearing all military, no nonsense. Sherlock knows he's in for it as people in the crowded hallways part to let them through. Some even go so far as to throw a sympathetic look in his direction. He hates them all for it.

He deserves whatever it is he's about to get.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay, lovelies. Again, this proved to be a beast. Hence the chapter count bumping to 20.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“As some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall:
Some run from brakes of ice, and answer none:
And some condemned for a fault alone.”
- Measure for Measure, Act II, Scene i

I love [Deleted]

I miss [Deleted]

I'm sor [Deleted]

I want to come home.

Sherlock spends an hour staring at that final text, thumb constantly hovering over the ‘send’ button before moving quickly away once more. Patience was never his strong suit and staying away from John Watson is trying every ounce of Sherlock's considerably short supply.

His dressing gown hangs off his shoulder because John's hand isn't hiking it up. His tea has gone cold because John is the one to always refill it. His toes are numb because John's thigh isn't next to him, always there for Sherlock to stick his feet under.

He swallows hard and tosses the phone on the floor of the posh, but slightly past its prime hotel room, just in time for the door the swing open, brushing across the carpet.

“No one’s keeping you from him, you realize,” Mycroft says by way of greeting, and Sherlock rolls his eyes at his brother's ability to know all things at all times.

"Took you longer than I thought it would. You're slipping," Sherlock replies, sinking further into the
chair by the window that overlooks Washington Square Park.

"Bit close to John's flat, don't you think? For someone trying to stay away..." Mycroft lets the accusation hover in the stale air and Sherlock presses his nose further against the glass like an orphan in a Dickens novel.

"It had the best rates," Sherlock replies petulantly and Mycroft rolls his eyes.

"When has that ever concerned you?"

And before he can answer, Irene appears in the doorway behind Mycroft just in time to scoff at his squalor.

"Christ. I raised you better than this," she states, pulling her arms close to her chest as if afraid of contracting some sort of disease.

The comment is enough to draw a smile to Sherlock's lips, which quickly fades when Irene marches over, kisses him on the cheek and then swats him upside the head. "I promise I could do much worse, but frankly, I'm just happy you're all right."

"Going soft on me?" he asks and her eyes narrow.

"Don't test me."

And he doesn't, because she's stronger than she looks and she has a particularly big ring on her dominant hand. He's pretty sure it left an indentation on the left side of his cranium.

Mycroft taps his umbrella on the threadbare rug in a short, sharp rap, as if to call children to attention. It works, too, because both Irene and Sherlock's gazes snap to him as if chastened.

"If we could get down to it: through a rather roundabout way, we've connected the leaked video to Moriarty by tracing a series of IP addresses - "

"Are you sure?" Sherlock interrupts. "He's not usually that sloppy."

"He wasn't," Mycroft replies. "Mary Morstan was."

The pronouncement hangs in the air a moment as Sherlock takes longer than usual to process that particular bit of information. "John trusted her," he says rather numbly and Mycroft fixes him with a scathing look.

"His first mistake."

"Bitch," Irene mutters as she examines her fingernails and Sherlock loves her a bit more for that. In a very begrudging and not at all sentimental way.

The word is accurate if a little crass. He turns his head to glance out the window once more, vaguely hearing Mycroft drone on about web browsers and secure servers. There's a man in the park with John's look and bearing, and Sherlock's stomach lurches as he leans even closer to the glass. But then the man turns and it's not John at all. Just someone who looks like him, sent to taunt Sherlock for the spectacularly bad decisions he's made over the past 72 hours.

"Sherlock, are you even listening to me?"

"I don't know - were you talking?" he snarks back to his brother.
But before Mycroft can reprimand him for his tone, or something equally ridiculous, the phone in Sherlock's hand buzzes and his fingers tighten around it as he tenses, heartbeat kicking up a notch. And of course both Irene and Mycroft notice immediately because he can't kill a fly in Soho without Mycroft knowing in Budapest. Or something like that.

"Sherlock, what's going on?" Irene asks as she steps forward, hand held out for the phone. "I know that's not John. He said he stopped trying yesterday."

Sherlock winces at that, which lowers his defenses enough for his agent to swoop in and snag the phone from his hand. He returns his gaze to the window and the man that looks like John.

He already knows what the messages say.

**John looks sad today. But he's carrying on.**
**Such a good little soldier. - J.M.**

**He's flirting with the old ladies at the stage door. - J.M.**

**That jumper is quite fetching on him. I can see why you like having him around. - J.M.**

**Is he good in bed? I can only imagine. - J.M.**

**And trust me, I'm imagining. - J.M.**

**Shall I tell him you said hi? - J.M.**

**You don't deserve him.” – J.M.**

"Oh Sherlock," Irene whispers, eyes never straying from the phone in her hand.

Sherlock shrugs, a pathetic attempt to convey how utterly lost he feels. "I just thought it would be better," he shakes his head, "not better - *easier* to stay away. Though it hasn't really been that either."

Irene glances up, eyes aflame. "If you think John wants to be anywhere except right beside you, then you're even more obtuse than I thought."

The words hit Sherlock's sternum like a punch and he lowers his chin to his chest, just to catch his breath. "How is he?"

"How do you think," Mycroft spits and Sherlock flinches. "Time to come home, brother mine. We face these demons together."

And Sherlock knows he's right, even though he'll deny that fact until his dying day. Running was never the best option, but it seemed like the right idea at the time. To spare John. To save John.

Always for John.

"Come," Irene murmurs, running her fingers through his hair like one would a small child. "He's waiting."
Sherlock stands and throws a pointed look in their direction as he drops his dressing gown to stand in just his pants. Mycroft rolls his eyes and heads for the door while Irene just raises a lecherous eyebrow.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before, love,” she smiles wickedly.

“Being high as a kite and out of my mind doesn’t count,” he replies as Mycroft clears his throat on the other side of the room.

“Sherlock?” he asks, pulling a file off the top of a bureau and holding it up, before flipping through it rapidly, eyebrows rising with every sheet of paper he scans.

“For after the Tonys,” Sherlock murmurs and Mycroft shakes his head.

“Sherlock, you could end this now.”

“No,” he responds sharply as Irene strides over and peers over Mycroft’s shoulder.

“Sherlock, where did you get this?”

“I’ll tell you after the Tonys.”

“But…” she sputters, “Why wait?”

“Because I think John has a very real chance of bringing home that award and I want to see Moriarty’s face when he does it.” He picks up his dressing gown and gathers it around himself like the armor he pretends it is. “Everything else is out there. What more damage could he possibly do?”

“Do you really want to ask that question?” his brother quietly replies.

And Sherlock glances at the unmade bed that he slept alone in last night. Nothing is worse than that.

“Just… wait.” The sheets mock him with their careful disarray. “Please.”

xxxxxx

[The camera comes to life revealing Sean's toothy grin]

Sean: Hello, Broadway.com. I've commandeered John's camera for the moment while he gets ready for Inside the Actors Studio. [adopting a British accent] Very posh. His tie even matches his pocket square.

[The camera swings around to show John tying his tie in the mirror and flipping him off.]

Sean: Ooooo! They'll have to blur that out!

John: My tie always matches my pocket square.

Sean: John has a better fashion sense than most of us combined.

John: True.

Harry: [off camera] Johnny Boy, you ready?

Sean: Johnny Boy? Oh I'm so glad I got that on camera.

[Harry enters the frame and gives the camera a cheeky grin.]
Harry: The STORIES I could tell. Did you know, when he was six –

John: And that’s enough of that!

[The camera shakes as John takes it from Sean and promptly turns it off]

Harry cackles as the camera is manhandled back into John’s possession and promptly stowed in his bag.

“The world knows enough about me, thank you very much. They don’t need your childhood anecdotes,” John snaps, placing a kiss on her cheek as he heads into the backstage area of the auditorium.

Sean nudges her. “You and I are going to chat later.”

“Don’t I know it,” Harry laughs, smile faltering the minute she turns away from her brother’s castmate. She gets stressed for John when he does interviews. Sure, he’s charming and witty and profound when he needs to be – normally unfazed by the questions that come with his line of work – but she can read the uneasiness in the set of his shoulders. The anxious ticks and twitches that have plagued his limbs since they arrived at Pace University.

John is nervous. And John doesn’t get nervous.

“It was good of you to come,” she says after a moment and Sean shrugs.

“I figured he could use one more person in his corner.”

Mention of the person who should be there and isn’t is decidedly left unsaid.

Mike and Irene are sitting in the front row when Harry and Sean make their way to the hall. Mike’s knee is bouncing and Irene’s lips are particularly red today. Battle-ready, then.

Harry smiles tightly as she takes a seat on the other side of Mike, who pats her knee good-naturedly. She’s known Mike for years, long enough for him to become a surrogate big brother. Or a phone call in the middle of the night when she was too drunk and too ashamed to call John. He was always there with bail, a stern look, and a ride home. He’d even throw in some paracetamol if he was feeling particularly generous.

The lights go down and her heartbeat kicks up a notch, jumping slightly as the host himself, James Lipton walks out onstage.

"Good evening, and welcome to the Actors Studio at Pace University," he begins. "Our guest tonight is one of Broadway’s biggest stars and most talented men. He’s received two Outer Critics Circle Awards, a Drama Desk Award, a Drama League nomination, and three Tony Award nominations over the span of his illustrious career, the most recent of which, of course, comes from his incredible turn as the Scottish King himself, Macbeth. These days, he can be found at the St. James Theatre on 44th St. but this evening, I’m happy to say he can be found on our stage. The Actors Studio is very proud to welcome John Watson.”

Harry holds her breath as John walks onstage, squinting in the bright lights and ducking his head against the roaring of the crowd that stands for him. He shakes James Lipton’s hand and waves to the crowd, before unbuttoning his suit jacket and taking a seat, sending a wink in Harry’s direction.

She smiles supportively in return. John only winks at her when he’s nervous.
“We begin as always at the beginning. Where were you born?”


“And what was your father’s name?”

“Arthur John Christopher Watson,” he replies, voice steady, and Harry applauds John's ability to remain calm and collected at any mention of their father. She's never been that talented.

“And what was your father’s profession?”

“He was a mechanic.”

“And what was your mother’s name?”

“Catherine Eloise,” he says, shoulders relaxing.

“And she was…?”

“A schoolteacher.”

“Your mother once wrote that when you were eleven, you came downstairs with a cardboard box on your head like a crown and recited the entire Henry V St. Crispin’s Day speech.”

John smiles and nods as the audience laughs.

“Yeah, yeah, that happened,” he says. “I was a bit… precocious. I think my history teacher read it to us and I just couldn't get it out of my head.”

Harry had forgotten that. John chased her around with a wooden sword for days.

The interview goes on and James Lipton handles the newness of John’s military past with grace, respect, and care, asking the questions politely and allowing John to artfully dodge those he does not wish to answer.

“Where were you shot?” James Lipton asks, and it’s said with such simplicity that Harry inhales sharply. Mike reaches over and pats her arm.

“Left shoulder. From the front, exit wound in the back. Through and through,” John replies.

“And theatre came after that.”

“Yeah, as therapy.” John shifts in his seat. This is new territory for him. “They’ve found that theatre can help soldiers returning from war. Those with PTSD, those recovering. It’s an escape. An outlet of sorts, if that makes sense.”

“And did it? Help?”

John smiles. “Well, I’m onstage with you so I should think so.”

The crowd laughs and they move onto John’s early career. His days at Central and nabbing *My Fair Lady*. And then James Lipton throws her for a loop by asking:

“What’s your earliest musical memory? When did you start singing?”

John cocks his head for a moment and his eyes find her in the crowd. He smiles warmly and winks,
and this time, she knows he’s not nervous.

“It was probably a lullaby for my little sister, Harry.”

“Which lullaby?”

His cheeks flush as he replies, “Hushabye Mountain’ from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. We loved that film.”

And the memory hits Harry so viscerally that she nearly doubles over. She remembers lying in her Star Wars bedding, hand-me-downs from John that she was only too eager to get, and being frightened that the monster from the trash compactor was hiding under her bed. John came in to check, night after night, before tucking the R2-D2 covers up to her chin.

He would have been young enough to still have Star Wars sheets himself, but he gave them up, simply because they made four-year-old Harry happy, while he took the plain, blue spare set for his own bed.

And he would sing ‘Hushabye Mountain’ as he sat on the edge of her mattress, until her lids became too heavy and she drifted off to sleep. To this day, she doesn’t think she’s ever heard him sing the end. She was gone long before that.

“And is Harry here tonight?” James Lipton asks, bringing her back to the present as John smiles devilishly.

“She’s right over there in the front row, attempting to hide behind my agent.”

The camera finds her as the crowd claps, and she pulls her face from Mike’s shoulder long enough to give a small wave.

The interview continues without incident – they touch on his greatest hits onstage and his bit parts onscreen. They spend a lot of time on *Macbeth* because that’s what he’s here promoting, yet mention of Sherlock is relegated to a simple “What’s it like to work with him?”

Harry wonders if John, or more likely Mike, asked James Lipton to leave the personal aspect out of the afternoon’s proceedings. Even some members of the audience seem disappointed by the lack of dish. But John is charming and funny and humble, and he has the crowd eating out of the palm of his hand by the interview’s end, as they get to the host’s final two infamous questions.

“Favorite curse word?”

“Oh, so many.” John groans, brow creasing as he wracks his brain, and Harry guffaws because she’s heard him use many of them in increasingly colorful fashion. “I think I have to go with one I learned in the Army: Telhas Teezez.”

“Which means?”

“Kiss my arse. Literally, I believe it’s ‘lick my arse, but it just rolls off the tongue so easily.” The audience crows and John turns beet read. “Pun *not* intended!”

James Lipton chuckles and shuffles his index cards one last time. “And finally, if heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the pearly gates?”

John replies without missing a beat: “You stubborn son of a bitch, I expected to see you *ages ago*. 

"I think I have to go with one I learned in the Army: Telhas Teezez."
The crowd applauds and Harry swallows down a lump in her throat because she’s just so damn proud of him. Of the boy who’d always been a mite smaller than the rest of the pack yet became her fiercest protector. Of the man who commands a stage as authoritatively as the greats who’ve come before him. He glances at her as the audience stands to depart and she blows a kiss in his direction before turning and noticing a familiar silhouette banging the back door open.

Yes, she’d recognize that enviously curly hair anywhere.

*Sherlock Holmes, you stupid git. You aren't fooling anyone.*

xxxxxx

Hours later, Sherlock inhales deeply as he opens the stage door, listening to the giant thunderclap sound effect that signals the start of the show. It rattles the walls and sounds more like a homecoming than a kettle set to boil.

Fred fixes him with a stern look that softens by the time Sherlock passes him, nodding up the stairs with his head as if to say, “Time to go to work.”

Sherlock gives him a humbled nod as he passes, taking the stairs two at a time. His own entrance isn’t for a while yet, but he’s not even sure if he’ll be allowed onstage tonight. He peeks his head around the corner and finds the hall quiet – most of his fellow actors are either on stage or in their dressing rooms. He quickly makes his way to his assigned area and puts on his first costume – just in case – before making his way down the stairs to the wings on stage left.

He knows for a fact that John exits on stage right.

He finds Sean sitting in the stairway, listening to the action onstage through the intercoms, getting ready to make his entrance. His entrance on Sherlock’s behalf. Sherlock pauses, waiting for the inevitable moment when Sean realizes that the person coming down the stairs behind him has stopped rather abruptly. And when the realization eventually comes, he turns and freezes, face transforming into a hard mask even as his eyes betray his relief at seeing Sherlock okay and whole.

Sean would have every right to tell him to sod off and wait until tomorrow before taking the stage again, but his eyes merely narrow as he takes in Sherlock’s appearance – identical to his own.

“’Bout time your sorry ass showed up,” is all he says as he stands up, claps Sherlock on the shoulder and retreats back up to his dressing room to change into his Macduff costume.

“Sean,” he murmurs before the man turns the corner on the landing.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“Anything for John,” Sean replies, a sharp barb which he softens with an eyebrow raise and a pointed look towards the stage. Sherlock takes the hint and enters the darkness with short breath and a galloping heart.

Clara’s jaw drops as he steps up next to her and she draws back to punch him in the arm hard enough to leave a decent bruise. He grunts as he takes the hit, knowing he deserves much more. She exhales and turns her attention back to the stage, gently rubbing his arm as if to soothe the literal blow.
He supposes that his homecoming will continue to be much of the same. Gladness wrapped in momentary retribution. If that’s all he gets from John, he’ll consider himself quite lucky –

But finally clapping eyes on the man he loves stops his feet where they tread. John is onstage with Ian and Andrew as Duncan and Banquo, looking every bit the king he plays. He’s beautiful in his confidence and his fury, and Sherlock has no idea how he stayed away from him for three days.

“Let’s after him,
Whose care is gone before to bid us welcome:
It is a peerless kinsman.”

‘Peerless’ is an apt word to describe John Watson. And as Ian and Andrew clear off, Sherlock inhales deeply as he takes his first step into that bright, unforgiving light.

There’s spontaneous applause when he makes his first entrance, likely because the audience was given little slips of paper in their Playbills saying that Sherlock was out of that evening’s performance. And even center stage, he can hear the sharp inhale that comes from somewhere off stage right.

His eyes are on the page and his lips speak the words, but the weight of John’s gaze on his shoulders nearly has his knees buckling. He curses William Shakespeare for making Lady Macbeth’s first act be reading a letter. The paper shakes in his hand.

Somehow, by miracle or sheer will, he makes it through his first monologue. But as he starts on the second – the second which ends with John’s entrance, his body seems to fold in on itself, bending and twisting as it reaches a conclusion he’s not entirely sure he can face.

“Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunpest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry ‘Hold, hold!’”

John enters from stage right and everything just stops.

His hands are balled into fists at his sides and his eyes are afire and yet disbelieving. I’m here, John. I’m sorry. I’m here.

“Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!” he murmurs, lacking all the pomp and circumstance those lines should normally have.

“My dearest love,” John’s voice cracks, even as his chin juts out in defiance. “Duncan comes here to-night.”

Sherlock takes a step towards him without really meaning to. “And when goes hence?”

“To-morrow, as he purposes,” John replies, clearing his throat as his eyes focus somewhere on Sherlock’s right lapel.

“Oh, never
Shall sun that morrow see!" he begins by rote, but all he can think about is the fact that John cannot meet his eye.

"He that's coming
Must be provided for: and you shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom."

"We will speak further," John replies in a tone which implies there was little of Macbeth in its delivery.

"Only look up clear;
To alter favour ever is to fear:
Leave all the rest to me."

Sherlock exits first and the comforting sound of John’s steps quickly follow. Stage left has nearly been evacuated and Sherlock suspects that’s Clara’s doing. And thank goodness for it because when Sherlock pauses in the hall and turns, John’s face is stormier than a London spring.

"John –"

"No," he snaps as he stalks past him.

“John please,” he hisses, reaching out for his sleeve, and John whirls around, backing away as if scalded.

They stare at each other, panting, breaths unnaturally loud in the silent stillness that surrounds them. John is staring at him in a way he hasn’t done since that first week of rehearsal when he confronted Sherlock in the hallway. When he was all anger and confusion and well-deserved indignation.

And for the first time in his life, Sherlock is scared. Because the possibility of not having John Watson’s forgiveness didn’t cross the breadth and scope of his not inconsiderable knowledge spectrum.

“You’ll miss your cue,” John murmurs, nodding towards the stage and swiftly stalking down the hall to change into his next costume.

Sherlock makes his next entrance feeling ill and Ian’s disapproving gaze isn’t helping matters. He feels like a chastened child, which he supposes, is not undeserved in the slightest.

He and John have two more scenes together before either has any real significant off-stage break. And Sherlock spends the scene after Duncan’s murder muffling his lines into John’s neck if only to reacquaint himself with the feel of him in his arms.

And if the collar of his shirt is wet from something other than sweat, Sherlock does nothing to comment on the redness of John’s eyes as John grips his wrists and delivers his lines with mounting mania.

But despite the emotional upheaval he’s experiencing at the moment, even he can feel the electricity between them, borne of too much time apart and too many things unsaid. He tugs John offstage at the end of the scene, allowing Macbeth to fall away quickly, leaving a soldier just as lethal in his place. And when John strides by him with a muttered, "Follow. Now," Sherlock hops to, ignoring Clara’s incredibly worried look as they head up the stairs.
John’s back is straight, his bearing all military, no nonsense. Sherlock knows he’s in for it as people in the crowded hallways part to let them through. Some even go so far as to throw a sympathetic look in his direction. He hates them all for it.

He deserves whatever it is he’s about to get.

John bangs his dressing room door open, striding to the other side of the room with one hand on his hip and the other pinching the bridge of his nose. Sherlock quietly closes the door behind him and leans against it lest it fall down. It seems like a worthy task at the moment.

“Are you all right?” John asks as he turns, and the question so throws Sherlock, he can only stare blankly.

“What?”

“I said are you all right,” John repeats and Sherlock takes a step forward.

“Yes.”

“Good, then stand over there because I’m genuinely fighting the urge to deck you right now.”

Sherlock quickly nods and backs up once more, watching as John begins to pace like a prizefighter. His left hand clenches and he opens his mouth with so many aborted things he wants to say that Sherlock braces himself for the inevitable verbal onslaught.

Instead, what eventually comes is a humorless chuckle.

“You’re a selfish son of a bitch to come back like this. D’you know that? You had three days, but no, the first time I see you – after everything that’s happened – is on fucking stage.”

“John – ”

“You’re a drama queen!”

He nods and purses his lips together, because really, he can’t argue with that. “So it would seem.” He gives a feeble little shrug that seems so inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. "It would also seem, John, that I don't know how not to hurt you.'

And John stops pacing and stares, the crease on his forehead softening for the first time all evening. Possibly even for the first time all week. And Sherlock realizes that there’s something incredibly important that he has yet to say.

“I’m sorry.”

John’s face does that horrible crumpling thing, where it looks like he’s about to cry, but he pulls it together at the last moment. “I’m so angry at you,” he manages, voice hoarse.

“I know.”

“You left me.”

“Yes.”

“When I needed you most.”

“I’m aware.” He swallows. “Painfully aware.”
“Why?” The question is so simple and yet it nearly knocks Sherlock sideways with its implications.

Why. Such a loaded question trapped in three simple letters.

Sherlock stares at the small bottle of fake blood resting atop John’s workstation, willing his thoughts to reassemble themselves into some semblance of order.

“Sherlock,” John murmurs, but gone is the anger and in its place: resignation. It hurts more, in a way. “I have to – ” John makes an aborted gesture towards the door and Sherlock swallows, feeling the panic rising. They’re getting to the Porter’s second to last speech and Sherlock has never wanted words not to come as badly as he does in this moment. John can’t leave. Not yet! It’s not resolved! “I have to go,” John murmurs, hastily shucking his shirt and pulling on a new one.

Sherlock’s hands twitch at his sides in an aborted effort to reach out for the fresh skin on display for him. Skin he’s kissed and worshipped and memorized.

“I still expect an answer,” John says, tucking his shirt in and strapping his sword around his waist once more. “I still want to know why.”

“I know you do.” Sherlock nods earnestly, and perhaps, by the end of the show, he’ll actually be able to put the words in an order that remotely makes sense.

John deserves many things; at the very least, John deserves that.

xxxxxx

The rest of the performance is a complete and utter blur. John is pretty sure that he hit all of his marks and said the correct lines, but honestly, he can’t be 100% positive.

Sherlock’s hand is heavy and warm in his own at the curtain call, and if John concentrates hard enough, he can almost feel the other man’s pulse pounding just as quickly as the organ that’s currently trying to thump out of his thoracic cavity.

The curtain call breaks up, but John holds tight to Sherlock’s hand hard enough for the taller man to give him a questioning look.

“They think we’re together,” he murmurs through his practiced smile.

“Aren’t we?” Sherlock replies and it’s so small, John can’t help but give his hand a squeeze and he tosses one final wave to the audience. He doesn’t answer though.

He leads them offstage, letting go as soon as they safely reach the wings and ignoring the way his fingers automatically reach out once more. He refuses to look behind him as he stalks his way to his dressing room and he’s swift to shut the door once he gets there, ensuring that Sherlock does not follow him inside.

It’s rude and juvenile and petty, but right now, he just needs a goddamn minute alone.

Nate is quiet as he enters and more careful than usual as he helps John out of his costume. Normally, he hates being treated like something breakable, but the past few days have proven just how fragile he can be. He’d rather not test the theory at the moment and those around him seem to get that.

“Ta, Nate,” he murmurs as Nate gathers his things and the other man nods, giving John a supportive smile that fades quickly.
“He’s been waiting in the hall since I came in here, by the way.”

John sighs and stares at his reflection in the mirror. “Yeah.”

Nate takes his leave when he realizes John isn’t going to elaborate, and John takes a moment to himself before squaring his shoulders and opening the door, only to yelp and jump back when Sherlock nearly topples into the room.

The taller man straightens himself and smooths his shirt, clearing his throat as he tries to regain his dignity. “I – I figured we should probably exit the stage door at the same time. Like you said: they think we’re together.”

John swallows hard, because of course they’re together, but the sting is still too painful to allay Sherlock’s fears at the moment. So instead, he merely nods, grabbing his things and staring at Sherlock’s shoes as the man leads the way down the stairs.

Fred gives them a decidedly less enthusiastic “‘Night, boys,” and John pauses for all of a moment, bracing himself before grabbing Sherlock’s elbow as the other man opens the door.

Screams erupt and cameras flash, and John has never wanted to be an actor less than he does in this moment. But he’s a professional and so he plasters a smile on his face and takes the Sharpie that Fred is holding out to him as he steps forward to one end of the barricade while Sherlock takes the other.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” the first fan says and John, despite his mood, can’t help but chuckle.

“Thanks very much. I’m sure, somewhere, Shakespeare is very pleased.”

It’s a bit of a blur really. All he can think about is the fact that Sherlock is back and Sherlock is near and Sherlock is such an unbelievable toser.

Laughter erupts from the other side of the barricade and John can’t help but wonder what the infuriating man said to elicit such a response. Damn it all to hell.

“Move it along, move it along,” Sean calls as he catches up to him and John smiles.

“Yeah, yeah. Not all of us can sign a circle and call it a signature.”

“Hey!” Sean yells indignantly, holding up a playbill. “That is not a circle.”

“Looks pretty circular to me,” John replies, laughing heartily as much of the crowd agrees with him. Sean rolls his eyes and continues on his way, purposefully finishing his next signature with a grand flourish.

“Idiot,” John chuckles as he approaches a girl, reaching out for her Playbill with a smile that falters when she says, “I think your boyfriend’s jealous.”

“What?” he asks and the girl nods across the way, to Sherlock who’s glowering at them as he holds an unsigned Playbill in his hand.

“It’ll do him good,” John replies after a moment with a wink, even as a heavy feeling settles in the pit of his gut.

He does the rest of the stage door with a sour taste in his mouth.

There’s a black SUV waiting for them, a perk their general management company offers that John
usually denies. Given recent events, though, he decided that having a getaway car wouldn’t be such a bad idea. But as he approaches the end of the barrier, he realizes that if he and Sherlock don’t both get in, it’ll look bad. And he doesn’t need any more ‘bad’ this week.

He finishes before the other man and opens the car door, waiting silently while Sherlock finishes up. Finally, he caps the Sharpie and tosses it back to Fred who catches it deftly, before turning to John and stopping dead on the pavement.

“Coming?” John asks with an eyebrow raise and Sherlock briefly looks delighted and then heartbroken when he realizes that what John’s doing is likely for appearances only. And watching those emotions play out on Sherlock’s face nearly breaks John.

The taller man nods and slides across the backseat after John, closing the door on the wolf-whistles from the still-waiting crowd. They’re quiet for a moment as the driver pulls away from the curb.

“You can drop me off around the corner, if you’d like,” Sherlock murmurs after a moment and John sighs heavily as he stares out of the window.

The car pauses on the corner of 8th and 44th Street, and John knows the driver is awaiting instruction on whether to turn north towards Sherlock’s apartment or keep going to 9th Avenue and turn south towards John’s.

“To the Village, Charlie,” John calls up after a moment and Charlie nods in the rearview mirror.

“You got it, Mr. Watson.”

The silence is heavy and John can feel Sherlock’s gaze on the back of his head. They won’t get into it now, not with an extra set of ears, even though John knows Charlie is about as trustworthy as they come. Still, he feels the need to say something, to get Sherlock’s stare to stray elsewhere because John truly isn’t sure if he can handle one more moment of it.

“I don’t want to go home alone tonight,” he finally whispers and that seems to do the trick because Sherlock turns to gaze out the window once more.

The rest of the ride is spent with only the low radio for company, until they pull up in front of John’s flat and he thanks Charlie as he exits the car. His legs feel heavy and slow as he makes his way up the small stoop to unlock the front door. Sherlock’s presence behind him is oppressive, nearly consuming him in his desire to turn and both snog him and shake him senseless.

He can barely breathe as he enters his home, which is dark, quiet, and a bit messy. His depression had left him with little energy to clean, but he can’t be bothered with that right now. Not when there’s a talk to be had. He turns and is about to ask if Sherlock wants tea, because he’s many things but English above all else, and only then does he realize that Sherlock is staring at the floor and shaking – and the last thread of John’s stubbornness cracks.

“Jesus, come here,” he breathes, reaching forward and pulling Sherlock to his chest, holding him tightly until he goes boneless in his arms.

It takes Sherlock a moment to return the favor, hands limply coming up to grasp the back of the coat John hasn’t taken off yet.

“This doesn’t mean I’m not still mad at you, but you are my priority above all else. Understood?”

He can feel Sherlock’s jaw work as the man swallows and nods against John’s neck.
“Good,” he says as he pulls away and places a kiss on Sherlock’s forehead, creased in what can only be a cocktail of hurt, confusion, and determination. And as they stare at each other, John truly wonders if this is what it’s like when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. “I’m going to make tea. And you’re going to start at the beginning.”

Sherlock nods and shrugs out of his coat, stumbling slightly as he reaches down to undo his shoelaces. John returns a moment later to find Sherlock sitting in the corner of the couch, knees pulled up to his chest as he stares at the steam wafting from the mug John places in front of him. He takes a seat on the other side of the couch, waiting for Sherlock to start whenever he’s ready.

"John, Moriarty is more dangerous than I think you realize," Sherlock begins quietly. "And he's dangerous because I can’t refute a lot of what he's said in the past. Most of it is hearsay, but a lot is cold hard fact. I am a drug addict. I am an asshole. And as for my relationship with you, well… I think the video speaks for itself."

John smiles, because he refuses to let that video be anything other than evidence of an incredibly good thing in his life. But Sherlock looks so broken that John can only nudge him supportively with his toes.

"There are a lot of lies wrapped up in truths and half-truths – too much for me to untangle," Sherlock continues. "And I figured the only way to fight him would be to discredit him."

“And how did you plan to do that?”

“There are rumors. Gambling debts, award ballot bribes, sexual harassment of coworkers. But nothing concrete. I’ve been searching for years, but more recently, the search has been a bit lacking.” He glances up sheepishly. "I had something more important to focus on."

John swallows as Sherlock looks at him, eyes softening.

“Nothing is more important than you, John. But when he came after you, I thought…”

“You thought?” John prompts.

“I thought I was doing you more harm than good. And that going away would remove you from the line of fire.”

John smiles sadly. “I’m a soldier, Sherlock. I’m no stranger to being in the line of fire.”

“I realize that, too – ”

“And don’t you think that’s my decision to make, anyway?”

“Possibly,” Sherlock shrugs. “Though your track record of protecting yourself is not exactly the most stellar.”

John snorts and pinches the bridge of his nose, too physically and emotionally exhausted to continue. Sherlock didn’t do anything out of malice. Sherlock is here. Sherlock is safe. That’s all John needs to know in this immediate moment.

“I love you,” he states, looking up once more.

“I know,” Sherlock replies.

“I’m still angry.”
“I remember.”

John sighs and stands, holding his hand out while Sherlock blinks blankly at it. “We'll continue this tomorrow. Come on, we're going to bed.”

“We are?”

“Yes. I’m tired - I haven’t slept well since you buggered off.” He tugs him into the bedroom and strips down to his pants, staring pointedly at Sherlock who’s still completely clothed. “If you’re going to stay dressed fine, just get in bed,” he groans as he slips under the sheet and burrows into the pillow. “Need you there.”

He vaguely hears Sherlock begin to disrobe and he feels the bed dip as the mattress accepts the weight of another body. Sherlock remains on his side, though, as if an invisible line has been drawn down the middle.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asks, because he needs to know. He needs to know that losing Sherlock, even for a few days, had some sort of fruitful outcome.

Sherlock rolls toward him and he feels a finger gently trace the curve of his cheek. "Nearly."

It’s the last thing he remembers feeling before he wakes hours later with Sherlock wrapped around him, arms tight across his ribs and breath warm on his collarbone.

And John holds him a bit closer as he drifts back off to sleep, because everything that needs to be said can wait until tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

- The line about orphans in a Dickens novel was BLATANTLY stolen from Martin Freeman's interview on The Tonight Show. Blatant thievery. I have no regrets.
- Inside the Actors Studio is filmed at Pace University in New York for their acting program. It's hosted by James Lipton.
- A lot of the delay on this came from not being able to crack the Inside the Actors Studio bit. I thought I'd have to type out the whole thing and that became so daunting. I think I might do the transcript as a separate fic in this universe, because I'd love to explore John's answers to those questions.
- 'Hushabye Mountain' is sung by Dick Van Dyke in the movie, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. That movie is great and if you disagree, I challenge you to a duel.
- James Lipton really does always ask for favorite curse word and what you want God to say to you.
- I don't know Arabic, so if I got Telhas Teeze incorrect, I'm so sorry!
"But why is my agent about to come to your apartment?" he asks rather petulantly, jealousy tugging at his insides.

John smiles. "Because she was going to make sure my outfit did not – how did she put it? – 'embarrass the production and bring shame upon my family.' The fact that you're here is just an added bonus. It means Mycroft won't have to file a police report."

Sherlock snorts. "That's never stopped him before."

Sherlock isn’t quite sure where he is when the sun hits his face, but then he recognizes the specific contours of the shoulder his cheek is mashed against and he relaxes at the familiar feel. In all actuality, though, would he really be cozying up to anyone’s shoulder other than John’s?

He groans and lifts his head, taking in John’s parted lips and creased brow, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath Sherlock’s palm. He looks troubled even in sleep, and suddenly, the prior evening’s events come crashing back to him with a clarity that’s entirely too rude for such an early hour.

He met John face-to-face, on stage, after having disappeared for three days. He's surprised John didn't bring a whole new level to Shakespeare and chin him. He would have been well within his rights.

Coffee. Coffee will get him in John's good graces once more.

He carefully extracts himself, lifting John's arm off his hip and sliding out of the sheets, padding into the kitchen in his pants. John's coffee pot is much like the man himself: straightforward and simple. It gets the job done. Unlike the newfangled, complex piece of machinery currently sitting on Sherlock's own counter.
He listens to the steady drip of the brew as he glances around the apartment. Its clutter is telling – he reads John's anxiety in the half empty scotch bottle on the coffee table, his frustration in the shattered picture frame on the entertainment unit, his depression in the scattered clothes on the bedroom floor. John is normally neat and tidy – an endearing quality left over from his Army days – but the effect of Sherlock's disappearance is scattered all over the flat.

The coffee pot beeps and Sherlock rouses himself to pour two cups, padding back to the bedroom and setting the extra mug on the bedside table, before stepping back and watching as the scent of french roast slowly wakens John.

"Mmmm, you're the best," he groans, smiling sleepily for a second that Sherlock knows won't last, because of course John still has one foot in the dream world. He hasn't remembered what exactly occurred the night before. And sure enough, his eyes snap open a moment later and lock onto Sherlock, blinking rapidly as he takes in his surroundings.

"Morning," Sherlock murmurs warily from his place in the doorway as John shifts up onto his elbows, gaze darting from the mug next to him to the man hovering five feet away.

"Hi," he replies.

"I made coffee," Sherlock points out, which is quite possibly the most obvious thing he's ever said in his life.

"Yes," John says with a soft smile. "I see that." An awkward silence descends as John reaches for the cup and clears his throat. "What time is it?"

Sherlock glances at the clock on the wall. "Just after 9."

John nods. "Irene'll be here soon."

"Irene? Why?"

And John stares at him like he's lost his mind. "The Drama League Luncheon is in a matter of hours. You do remember that you're nominated, yes?"

Does he? He's honestly not sure.

"But why is my agent about to come to your apartment?" he asks rather petulantly, jealousy tugging at his insides.

John smiles. "Because she was going to make sure my outfit did not – how did she put it? – 'embarrass the production and bring shame upon my family.' The fact that you're here is just an added bonus. It means Mycroft won't have to file a police report."

Sherlock snorts. "That's never stopped him before."

John chuckles softly and kicks the covers back, thoroughly avoiding Sherlock’s gaze as he pads into the living room. Sherlock pretends it doesn't hurt as much as it does.

He follows at a distance, watching John pick up the bits and pieces of scattered clothing and wayward pillows that had gathered over the course of the week. He takes occasional sips of coffee, coffee that he seems to enjoy which is somewhat of a comfort. Sherlock might have lost his tact, but not his ability to make a decent brew.

“What time is Irene expected to come?”
John opens his mouth but the buzz of the intercom beats him to his answer. Sherlock rolls his eyes. She always did have impeccable timing.

John smirks as he unbolts the door and leaves it ajar, and Sherlock can already hear the telltale clicking of heels on the marble staircase.

Sherlock swallows and isn’t quite sure what to do with his hands so, after flailing for a moment, he clasps them behind his back, awaiting the judgment that’s about to blow through that door.

And arrive she does, decked head to toe in Alexander McQueen, eyes narrowing into perfect, lancing slits the moment they clap on him. Justitia, indeed. She winks in John’s direction before giving a full body shiver.

“Bit frigid in here for late May, don’t you think?”

She raises an eyebrow before blindly handing John a garment bag marked Tom Ford, striding over to Sherlock, and smacking him squarely upside the head.

“Ow! Really?” he yelps, rubbing his curls and looking to John for help, but the bastard merely shrugs and heads into the kitchen.

“On stage, William Sherlock Scott Holmes? You had to make yourself known on bloody stage?”

Ah. Yes, well, she did have a bit of a point there. “John’s already beaten you to that particular tirade.”

“I should bloody well hope so,” she bites back, pointing at him threateningly once more, before following John into the kitchen and ushering him toward the loo a moment later. “To the shower with you.” She turns to Sherlock, glancing at him up and down. “You’re next. We have a lot of work to do in a short amount of time and I’m not exactly a miracle worker. The dark circles under your eyes alone will take hours.”

Sherlock nods, listening to the shower spring to life, and cursing his stupidity. How could he miscalculate a situation so horrifically? He had measured the costs and truly thought this to be the best course of action.

How wrong he’d been.

He feels a hand on his shoulder and turns to find Irene staring at him with a sympathetic expression that would usually grate, but now – feeling more alone than he has in quite some time – he draws a surprising amount of comfort from it.

“He’ll come ‘round,” she murmurs, pressing his own garment bag from Savile Row into his chest. “You’ll see.”

Sherlock isn’t a betting man, but if he were, that’s certainly one wager he’d leave well enough alone.

xxxxxx

They’ve said all of three words since they left the apartment and those words were “Yes,” “No,” and “Thanks.”

And even the “Thanks” was an afterthought on John’s part.

The ride is perhaps the most awkward he has ever taken in his life, with Sherlock staring forlornly
out one window, John clenching his jaw in the reflection of the other, and Irene, happy as a clam between them, asking driver Charlie about his love life.

Traffic is relatively light for a Friday morning and they arrive at the Marriott Marquis long before John is ready. There’s an odd mix of people fighting for space at the valet – harried tourists unloading their luggage from car boots, cabbies waiting their turn for a fare, and the theatre elite, dressed in their finery long before their coffee has kicked in, greeting each other with a kiss on the cheek and a mindless platitude. John saves his acting for matinees and evenings. He’s not sure he has the strength to muster any sort of convincing talent now.

“Well, this just will not do,” Irene snips as they pull up in front of the revolving doors, grabbing each man by the tie and turning them to face her. “Buck up. All this moping is adding years to your features and neither of you will want that when you face the press line that’s waiting inside.”

John snorts and Sherlock rolls his eyes – at least they can agree that Irene’s concerns, though well-meaning, are not exactly high on their list of priorities.

“Dull,” Sherlock murmurs as he manhandles his tie from her grip and opens the door, nearly getting clipped by a taxi that barrels by.

“Oi! Watch it!” John yells, throwing up a rude gesture to drive the point home as the cabbie speeds off.

“And there’s my genial leading man,” Greg drawls, shaking his head and raising an eyebrow as John shrugs innocently.

“He nearly killed Sherlock.”


“Quite,” Sherlock snips, before gathering his coat around him and stalking past them toward the lobby doors. John sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose as Greg claps him on the shoulder.

“Reunion went that well, huh?”

“Just be grateful Macbeth didn’t punch Lady M in act one scene five.”

“Trust me,” Greg nods, “I am.” He gestures toward the door and they walk amiably, following Sherlock and Irene at a distance. “Would have done wonders for ticket sales, though,” he says as John laughs. “Not that we’ve needed help there.”

John nods and throws a wave to Andrew Rannells when he catches his eye from the other side of the lobby.

“You know, it might have been better had he not come today.”

John’s head shoots up and Greg is already holding out his hands in defense.

“I just mean that it would have been better had this come along when you guys had gotten things sorted. He’s just back, you’re barely speaking, and the one thing the press loves more than a secret relationship is an unhappy secret relationship.”

John doesn’t respond, but he knows where Greg is coming from and, in fact, he agrees. The timing is all a bit shit.
“There are gonna be a lot of questions,” Greg continues, but John cuts him off.

“Mike and Irene went over everything with me yesterday. Granted, that was before Sherlock swanned onstage in the middle of act fucking one so I’m honestly not sure how much of my press prep holds up,” he spits out, unable and unwilling to hide the bitterness from his voice.

Greg sighs and claps him on the back as they near the top of the escalator. “Shame you’ve got a show tonight. I plan on starting in on the scotch asap.”

“Fuck you,” John chuckles. “It’s your bloody show.”

“And you’re doing a damn fine job with it,” Greg laughs, flagging Mike over as they head towards the ballroom doors. Sherlock and Irene are nowhere to be found, but if John had to guess, she’s likely giving him the same dressing down John received yesterday afternoon.

“Big smile, small talk. Keep the focus on the show and the nomination. If they ask you about Sherlock or your relationship, keep the tone light and the jokes lighter and bring it back to the professional. Do not touch the personal.”

It hadn’t exactly been groundbreaking information to receive, but John still took it to heart. And the words would likely be running on a loop in his head as he took his first step on that red carpet surrounded by bloodthirsty vultures.

“Shall we?” a voice says in his ear and he jumps, turning to find Sherlock hovering over his shoulder.

“Did you get the talk?”

“Mm, yes, but I didn’t pay attention.”

John snorts out a, “Typical,” but the humor dies in his throat when Sherlock takes his hand and laces their fingers together.

“If you remain stiff like that, the jig will be up and you’ll do further injury to your shoulder, requiring an appointment with that German physical therapist that you hate so much, so please just take my hand and look like you’re even the slightest bit happy about it.”

John glances up at Sherlock with wide eyes and a slack jaw, grip tightening on Sherlock’s palm.

“I’ve never not been happy to hold your hand,” he murmurs, running his thumb across Sherlock’s knuckles before abruptly letting go and moving towards the throng of reporters.

It takes a moment, but John hears Sherlock catch up to him a second later, nearly plastering himself to John’s back as they get to the beginning of the step-and-repeat.

“I’m sorry, John. Please forgive me,” he whispers hotly against the shell of John’s ear and John can’t help but close his eyes at the pain and utter longing he feels. "I can't do this without you by my side.”

“You’re an idiot,” he says as he turns in Sherlock’s arms, voice rough.

“Yes.”

“And I love you.”

“God help you,” Sherlock huffs, a strangled sound teetering on the edge of a sob.
“Now that doesn’t mean that I’m not still basically pissed off with you.”

“I know.”

"But I am always by your side, yeah? Always."

Sherlock swallows and nods. "Okay."

“And we really could have chosen a better place to have this chat,” John says in the tone of the long-suffering, referencing the hoard of photographers currently capturing the intimate moment as he tugs on Sherlock’s lapels.

“Agreed,” Sherlock replies, but there’s a gentle smirk on his face and he looks like he’s not sure if he wants to run away or snog John senseless. And since John would love the latter and hate the former, he’s hoping for a happy medium of sorts.

“You’re lucky Harry’s not here,” John murmurs after a moment. “I’d avoid her for the foreseeable future.”

Sherlock pales considerably. “She did threaten to kill me if I ever broke your heart.”

“Did she?” John asks, feeling such a surge of love, and his face must show his joy because Sherlock promptly glares at him.

“Don’t look so delighted at the prospect.”

“Well, good thing my heart is only bruised. It’s made of sturdier stuff than that.”

Sherlock mouth twitches, but he ducks his head, which John has learned means he’s well and truly contrite. He’s slowly learning Sherlock – navigating his tells like one navigates a familiar flat in the dark. It’s becoming a habit.

He gently tugs on Sherlock’s cuff and whispers, “Hey,” which coaxes a smile from the taller man. “None of that.”

“Ready, gentlemen? You’re up,” one of the many publicists on hand says and John raises an eyebrow in silent question, which Sherlock answers with a nod.

“I suppose the game is…” he begins, rocking forward on his toes as his nose brushes John’s hairline, “something.”

“On?” John quietly asks. Sherlock’s breath ghosts across his cheekbone.

“Yes. That.”

xxxxxx

The red carpet is a tedious but necessary evil, he supposes, but if it gets John closer to him physically than he has been in days, then Sherlock is more than happy to suffer for the cause. The proximity, however, doesn’t last long as the lunch seating has them placed on opposite sides of the stage on risers with the rest of the nominees, like an overly talented tiered wedding cake.

He’s sat between Andrew Rannells, who’s nominated for some musical that Sherlock had deemed pointless (as he deems most musicals, save for John’s) and Eddie Redmayne, who’s starring in a new Off-Broadway John Logan play. Which makes him ineligible for the Tony, a fact that Sherlock won’t acknowledge is to their advantage. He’s loathe to admit that the young man could actually give
him a run for his money.

Humility is not Sherlock’s strong suit.

Moriarty is (thankfully) nowhere near either of them – he’s been placed in the row behind them, midway between, likely torturing the poor ingénue sitting to his left.

"Hey, I managed to catch the show before we started previews," Andrew says, interrupting Sherlock from poking at his chicken. "Fantastic, man. Just... really, really good."

They're words that Sherlock has certainly heard before, but the sincerity in Andrew's tone makes him take notice.

"Thank you," he says carefully, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"And, John, holy shit," Andrew continues. "He and I did a workshop together last year. I knew he was good, but damn."

At that, Sherlock perks up, because he's not good at talking about himself, but he could write treatises about the tiny quirks and mammoth talent that make up one John Watson.

"Yes. He’s a revelation."

Andrew smiles and nods and, for a moment, Sherlock worries that they’re about to leave the professional and broach the personal, but Andrew merely returns to his plate and spears a green bean.

“I’m happy for him,” he eventually says and Sherlock knows he’s referring to more than just the nomination.

He doesn’t know quite what to do with that.

Luckily, he’s spared any verbal floundering by the sound of a throat clearing as Helen Mirren, last year’s winner, steps up to the mic.

He’s not entirely sure what happens next, mostly due to the fact that Helen’s voice is currently lulling him into a false sense of security. She’s got a wicked sense of humor, but the cadences and tone remind him so much of home that he dreams of Baker Street, longing for its shabby rugs and beaten leather sofa.

“Pay attention,” John mouths to him when he catches his eye down the row and Sherlock makes a show of rolling his eyes, to which John mouths, “Hit him for me,” to Andrew, who gently smacks Sherlock on the arm. Helen narrows her eyes at them like a strict headmistress and all three drop their heads, suitably chastened. It earns chuckles from the few who noticed the exchange.

They’re all introduced in turn and their accolades are talked about with the kind of adulation only reserved for award ceremonies and funerals. He’s pleased that John seems to get the biggest ovation, with multiple whistles coming from both the *Macbeth* table and their fellow nominees. Sherlock even gets a decent round of applause and a few genuine smiles from the people he can see in the audience. Still, this award could go to any number of actors on the stage, including the men sat on either side of him.

“And the Drama League Award goes to…”

Sherlock holds his breath. John catches his eye and smiles warmly. It’s distracting in its beauty. A
sight he’s sorely missed over the past few John-less days –
– which is why he is so woefully unprepared when they call his name.

xxxxx

"Sherlock Holmes!"

John is on his feet so quickly, he nearly knocks over his water glass. His throat is tight and his ears are ringing and he might actually be more thrilled for Sherlock than if he had won the award himself.

As for Sherlock, he’s sitting there blinking numbly and looking for all the world like the name Helen just called was not his own. He can vaguely hear Andrew say, “That’s you,” as Eddie nudges him with a laugh from the other side.

Sherlock stands on wobbly legs, much like Bambi learning how to walk, and automatically buttons his suit jacket, adjusting his cuffs as he slowly makes his way to the podium where Helen stands with his award. She grabs him around the neck and places a smacker on his cheek. He smiles, which is the first sign that anything from the last minute has actually sunk in.

John’s eyes are pricking and he swallows thickly as he finds his chair once more, watching as the man he loves clears his throat and throws a subtle look in his direction. Damn them for seating them so far apart – all he wants to do is wrap his arms around him and never let go. And sod the last 72 hours – he wants nothing more than to have this man by his side for the rest of his days.

“Yeah, Holmes!” someone yells from the audience and John can spot Sean’s voice anywhere by now. The man is certainly loud enough.

“Er – thank you,” Sherlock manages, making a noise that could be a chuckle or a heavy sigh, and even John can tell he’s overwhelmed. “I wasn’t… I didn’t, um, quite prepare.” He holds the award up to the light and seems to examine it, before blinking into the audience. “I’m not exactly… known for my generosity, magnanimity – ”

“Civility?” Helen murmurs with a warm smirk and John can’t help the snort that escapes. He had forgotten that Helen and Sherlock did Hamlet together, where Sherlock learned firsthand what happens when you go toe-to-toe with a Dame.

“That too,” Sherlock laughs, genuinely this time, and Helen reaches forward and pinches his cheek, much to the delight of the crowd. “No, I am not known for any of these things,” he replies, sobering once more, eyes flicking briefly in John’s direction again. “And though this is a lovely honor, I cannot, in good conscience, take credit for it.”

John inhales sharply.

“You cannot have Lady M without Macbeth and vice versa. And I would not have this award, or a great many other things, without the man seated to my right,” he states plainly, gesturing to John but not looking at him.

Applause breaks out and John smiles, swallowing thickly once more. His heart is beating so quickly, he feels faint, and he grips the napkin in his lap just to have something to hold onto.

“John Watson came to this project with very little support from me, I’m ashamed to admit. It was… not one of my finer moments.” The crowd chuckles and Sherlock shrugs sheepishly, a gesture that makes him look boyish and far more fragile than John would ever think him. “He excelled in every way I predicted him to fail. He surpassed every expectation I set. He quickly and efficiently proved
himself to be an enigma I could not crack. It was both infuriating and… enamoring.”

Sherlock pauses and John takes a moment to focus on his breathing, to examine the feel of the chair beneath him and the weight of a hundred gazes on his face. Anything that might prove to him this is actually happening. He stares at the condensation collecting on his water glass because if he so much as glances in Sherlock’s direction, he will absolutely lose it.

“John Watson is perhaps the finest actor and the best man I’ve ever had the good fortune of knowing,” Sherlock continues, staring out into the lights of the ballroom. “He is understated and yet commanding, kind yet merciless in his protection. He’s been through more in his life than any of us could ever hope to portray with any justice onstage. He is the reason I am standing here today.” Finally, Sherlock turns to him “It’s always been you, John Watson. You keep me right. I share this with you, as I hope to share all things.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence as the words fade into the heavy air. Then a single clap starts, likely from somewhere in the vicinity of the Macbeth table, where it’s joined by another and another until the room is positively thunderous with applause.

Sherlock blinks rapidly, award held limply in his hands, and John manages to wipe his eyes before his legs are carrying him across the stage to wrap that beautiful man up in his arms.

“You amazing, insufferable, gorgeous man,” he whispers in his ear as Sherlock buries his face in John’s neck.

“Good?”

“Very good, you git.” John pulls away and strokes his thumbs across the sharp curve of Sherlock’s cheekbones, as the rest of the room falls away. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Sherlock replies, smiling softly.

“Now say ‘thank you.”

“Oh, and thank you,” Sherlock manages into the microphone, which has the admittedly weepy room laughing. “From both of us,” he amends as he shoves the award into John’s grasp.

John clears his throat and tries not to well up again as he lifts the award and nods his thanks. And though neither man has ever been the most demonstratively affectionate person in public, Sherlock leans down and places a kiss on the side of John’s head, near where his heartbeat thuds in his temple.

John doesn’t remember sitting down or placing the award on the table in front of him. He doesn’t remember Brian clapping him on the shoulder or Kelli teasing him good-naturedly even as her mascara runs down her cheeks. He’s told it happened, but all he remembers are the feel of Sherlock’s lips in his hair and the searing look Sherlock gave him after they took their seats once more.

The ceremony wraps up quickly after that. At least he assumes it does, because the next thing he knows, he and his fellow nominees are being ushered offstage. He turns and cranes his neck into the crowd, briefly spotting Sherlock’s head above the masses, before he’s interrupted by Helen, who cups his face and plants a wet one on his cheek, as if it isn’t the first time he’s ever actually conversed with her.

“Oh you two. I could have throttled that boy years ago, but now, all I want to do is wrap him in a blanket and secret him away.”

John smiles and squeezes her elbow. “Likewise.”
“Right answer,” she replies with a wink, before turning and shoving him in Sherlock’s general direction. He stumbles, but Sherlock catches him with a hand to his aching chest.

“Hi,” he says rather dumbly and Sherlock beams.

“Hi.”

“That was…” he trails off because there really aren’t any words to describe what exactly that was.

“Quite,” Sherlock replies, not needing them anyway. “Come,” he murmurs into his hair once more, lips ghosting across the shell of his ear. “Irene is probably downright rhapsodic.”

And, indeed, Irene is practically beside herself as she tackles them the moment they make it into the auditorium, bobbing and weaving between the tables. Sherlock allows himself to be showered with emotional pleasantries for all of a moment, before muttering “loo” and dashing off for the nearest exit. John can’t blame him. For someone unused to expressions of sentiment, the afternoon is proving to be quite a departure from the norm.

“He just wrote a love letter to you,” Irene murmurs as she attempts to look like she hadn’t spent any part of that presentation in tears.

“I know,” John breathes, still wide-eyed. Still barely breathing. Still feeling the weight of the award Sherlock shared with him heavy in his hand.

“Bloody hell, mate,” Greg manages as he comes forward and shoves his hands in his pockets. Molly places a kiss on his cheek and John just tries to remember to put one foot in front of the other.

Mike stands away from the crowd, far back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest and a smug smile on his face – as if he’s been waiting for this moment since Greg called and offered John the role.

The right side of John’s lips tug up into a wistful smile. Maybe Mike has.

Thankfully, Sherlock appears a moment later, looking both annoyed and overwhelmed. “Loo line was too long. They were congratulating me,” he says, as if they were hurling insults at him instead.

John hooks his pinky with Sherlock’s and cocks a smile. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I’ll hail a cab,” Irene murmurs as Greg turns to shake a fellow director’s hand and introduce him to Molly, leaving Sherlock and John in their own little cocoon within the chaos.

John should have known it wouldn’t last long.

“How’s the laryngitis?” a voice says behind them and John feels Sherlock stiffen beside him.

No. James Moriarty will not destroy this for them.

“How’s the laryngitis?” a voice says behind them and John feels Sherlock stiffen beside him.

No. James Moriarty will not destroy this for them.

“Do you play chess?” John asks abruptly, and it takes him a moment to realize his feet have come together and his shoulders have kicked to attention. Mary stands next to the snake in front of him and he pays her no mind.

“Why?” Moriarty grins. “You want to go a round?”

John glances pointedly at the award in his left hand and Sherlock's palm in his right.

“That’s checkmate, I believe.”
John has just enough time to grin cheekily before Sherlock makes a strangled noise, tugs on his wrist, and they disappear into the crowd.

xxxxxx

But Sherlock doesn’t tug him towards the escalator. No, he continues on past it to the elevator banks and immediately punches in 8, the lobby floor.

“Sherlock, what are you – ?” John begins, but Sherlock cuts him off by crowding him up against the wall.

“We are going upstairs, getting a room, and I am going to shag you into the mattress.”

“Oh,” John breathes, shifting his hips so they slot up to Sherlock’s perfectly. “That’s… acceptable.” His voice hitches when Sherlock grinds into him subtly. It might be Sherlock’s new favorite sound.

The lift dings (his second favorite sound) and Sherlock ushers John in, vaguely aware that they are not the only ones occupying it. It’s hateful. A young girl, who clearly knows her Broadway, is staring at them, mouth agape as she clutches a Wicked Playbill from the previous evening to her chest. Sherlock just manages to bite back a remark about her poor taste in theatre.

Just.

And only because John is plastered to his front, back to chest, and Sherlock gets a positively wicked (no pun intended) idea as he shuffles forward and presses his length into John’s arse as discreetly as he can.

John inhales sharply, but can’t turn around lest he give the game away. Sherlock, therefore, takes great delight in the way John’s ears redden as he clears his throat, trying desperately not to look as aroused as he is. It’s not exactly helping Sherlock’s own predicament.

“I would have you right here if I could. Up against the glass walls of the lift for all the hotel to see. Would you like that?” Sherlock whispers in his ear and the award in John’s hand falls to the ground with a thud. “Mm, guess so.”

Thankfully, the doors to the eighth floor open, allowing John to put some space between his bum and Sherlock’s crotch before bending down to grab the fallen accolade. If he hadn’t, it would have been the end of both of them. The girl clutching the Playbill squeaks as they exit nearly tripping over themselves, and John snorts as Sherlock collides with his back.

“Get it together, Holmes.”

Sherlock grabs John’s hips and tugs him back flush against him once more. “I’m certainly endeavoring to.”

“Christ,” John groans, which turns into a whimper when Sherlock pulls away from him to lead him towards the check-in desk.

“May I help you, sir?” The woman behind the counter asks and John nods emphatically.

“One room for this evening,” Sherlock states, ending in a yelp as John pinches his bum. “Please,” he adds when he realizes the woman is looking at him oddly. And though she addresses them with all the politeness her job requires, she can’t help the small quirk of her eyebrow as she takes in their flushed faces and panting breaths. “Last minute trip, you know how it is,” Sherlock elaborates, putting on the charm as he leans his elbow on the counter.
“At ease,” John coughs and the woman smiles.

“Yes, quite the trip from the third floor ballroom,” she replies with a wink as Sherlock’s features slacken. She swipes his credit card and hands over the keys without another word – merely a very knowing, “Enjoy your stay, Mr. Holmes. Mr. Watson.”

“Indeed we shall,” Sherlock says as he practically drags John away from the desk towards the lifts once more.

“She knew my name,” John breathes and Sherlock can hear the panic in his tone already.

“That she did.”

“Sherlock –”

“John, she’s paid to be discreet. Besides, if you think half that ballroom doesn’t know exactly what we’re about to do, then you’re more naïve than I thought.” John’s jaw drops in indignation and Sherlock kisses him while simultaneously shoving him back into the lift. “And I love you for it.”

This lift is (blessedly) empty and (even more fortuitous) one of the inner lifts – therefore, not entirely made of glass. He has John against the wall before the doors even click shut, fingers sliding under his suit coat and digging into the warmth of his back.

John’s lips latch onto his jaw and gently nibble their way to his earlobe, drawing a moan from his mouth which John echoes a second later when Sherlock’s hands palm his arse.

“God, Sherlock,” he breathes, hastily undoing the buttons of Sherlock’s jacket and promptly going to work on his shirt. “Three days without this.”

“I know,” he groans as he dives for John’s lips again with a desperation he can’t quite contain.

“What was I thinking.”

“You weren’t,” John replies. “Or you were, but just too much.”

“Neither and both at the same time, I suspect.”

John hums his agreement which breaks off into another moan a second later. “There are cameras in here.”

“Don’t care.”

“You will when it ends up on TMZ.”

“It’s cute that you think our level of fame lands us anywhere near TMZ’s watchlist.”

“It’s cute that you just used the word ‘cute,” John giggles and Sherlock rolls his eyes and kisses him, just to shut him up again.

The doors open and they stumble to the room, managing to scandalize only one maid and two tourists on the way. It takes three tries to get the key card into the slot and by the time the door opens and they land on the bed, Sherlock is harder than he’s ever been in his life and he needs John Watson’s hands in his trousers right this second.

“Fuck, Sherlock, this needs to come off now,” John pants, wrestling with their suit jackets and managing to get tangled in both.
“Will you let me?” Sherlock asks, whimpering against John’s lips and John lets out a frustrated noise.

“Let you what? Sherlock, right now, I’ll let you do just about anything as long as these trousers come off.”

“I want to be inside you,” Sherlock breathes, the words tumbling out so quickly, they trip over his tongue, and John pauses in his wrestling to watch him with warm, yet hooded eyes.

“God yes. Yes, that.”

“Really?”

John cocks his head, gaze dancing over Sherlock’s features. “Of course. Of course I’d want that.” He presses a slow yet chaste kiss to Sherlock’s chin. “I want all of you.”

It feels like a thousand Bonfire Nights have just erupted in his chest and Sherlock can only blink dumbly before grinning and scrambling to his feet. “Pants. Now.”

“What?”

Sherlock quickly begins making work of his own flies, shoving his trousers and pants to the floor and tugging them off along with his socks. He looks over to find John staring at him like a starving man at a feast. “For the love of God, John, now is not the time to exercise your world class patience.”

“Right.” John clears his throat and quickly sits up, toeing off his own shoes and shucking his shirt before getting to work on his trousers. They aren’t even past his knees before Sherlock is tackling him to the bed once more.

John is quick to flip him over, though – damn that Army training – and press Sherlock’s hips into the bed, skin to skin, breath to breath, resulting in simultaneous moans creating the best of harmonies.

“Christ, Sherlock, you should come with a warning label.”

“In some circles, I do,” he murmurs, hands wandering to John’s bum and grinding against him.

John’s jaw drops and he makes an aborted noise as if in the most delicious kind of pain, before bending down to latch onto Sherlock’s neck.

“I’m being interviewed by New York Magazine tomorrow,” Sherlock moans, not really putting up much of a fight. “It wouldn’t do to show up with a love bite on my neck.”

“Then I’ll have to place it where it won’t be seen,” John practically growls, moving down Sherlock’s body towards his hip and sucking a purple mark just above the jut of his bone. Sherlock’s breath stutters in his chest and his fingers grab onto John’s hair, gently yet firmly, as the strands glow golden in the mid-afternoon sun streaming through the windows.

And suddenly, everything stops.

The sounds of the city fade away to a distant echo, an ebb and flow like a tidal basin; a meter to which they match their breaths. And breathe they do, as John climbs on top of Sherlock and grips his hips with a knee on either side. As he gently opens himself up with one finger, then two, followed by three, eyes closed in pained pleasure. As Sherlock tips his head back yet demands his eyes stay open. As he watches the flicker of emotion on John’s face, fingers digging further and further into heated, flushed skin.
And all Sherlock can do is hold on.

Gone is their frenzied pace and when John finally sinks down on him, it’s with a hiccupped sigh that neither man will admit is a sob.

Sherlock shifts up on the mattress, bringing them chest to chest, and he wraps his arms around John’s back, while John’s arms encircle his neck. The roll of his hips is slow and measured, a gradual torture that is the greatest kind of bliss.

Sherlock kisses every patch of skin he can find: chin, nose, jaw, ear. Bottom lip and right eyebrow. And John smiles and lets the most studious of men memorize his every perfect flaw. The emotions crest over John’s features and, for a moment, it looks like the wave will break, but when his voice comes, it’s as steady as his hands.

“I love you.” A whisper.

“I’m sorry.” A reply.

“I forgive you.” A smile.

“I love you too.” A sigh.

They come only moments apart, breathing as one and eventually falling asleep in tandem, limbs slotting perfectly together, ear over scar, palm over sternum, until the world fades away and the only sound is the gentle thump of their beating hearts.

You couldn’t wait until you got home? I could have gone without dodging detailed questions about your victory shag.
- Irene

You couldn’t wait until you got home? I could have gone without dodging detailed questions about your victory shag.
- Irene

Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Everything
By Alex Sanderson

First impressions are very important in the works of William Shakespeare and the first impression of one of his greatest interpreters may be summed up in one word: imposing.

I meet Sherlock Holmes at a café near his Upper West Side apartment and he sweeps in the door with a coat befitting a Bronte novel, before taking mere moments to smooth his windblown hair into a style that would take some men hours. He is not as tall as people believe, an anecdote Holmes is quick to point out as he gets in line, scarcely drawing breath as he rails on about the lack of pedestrian logic in the city. He barks his order to a barista behind the counter who writes his name on a cup without even asking, giving the man himself a fond eye roll as she takes his money. Clearly, he is a repeat customer. He takes his cappuccino (and even treats this reporter to a latte) before blowing out the door and heading towards the park with the kind of determined gait seen in the leading men he plays.

Central Park is clearly an escape Holmes knows well, as he navigates its trimmed paths with a
familiarity and ease that befits an old friend. His conversation is as enigmatic and varied as the man himself, ranging from Revolutionary battle histories to which vendor sells the best hot dog. (It’s Antonio on the north side of the skating rink, by the way.)

“See that obelisk over there?” he asks, pointing to Cleopatra’s Needle as we close in on the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “It was secured in May 1877 by judge Elbert E. Farman, the then-United States Consul General at Cairo, as a gift from the Khedive for the United States remaining a friendly neutral as France and Britain maneuvered to secure political control of the Egyptian Government. It was erected on February 22, 1881 thanks to a generous grant by William H. Vanderbilt to bring the obelisk from Cairo to New York. Its twin lies on the Victoria Embankment near the Golden Jubilee Bridges in London. Both were made during the reign of the 18th Dynasty Pharaoh Thutmose III."

He says all of this with scarcely a breath, like those Herculean monologues he’s long since mastered. It’s a wonder to behold.

He speaks fondly of London, though it’s clear that his heart is currently in New York. He recounts the city’s history with more passion than one does if they’re just reciting from a guidebook. The reasons for that are presumably tenfold – career, opportunities… newfound love? But he dodges the prompts like a championship footballer, American or otherwise, and we continue into the museum in companionable silence.

First up is Imperial China, and Holmes’ commentary is so detailed (and correct, Google tells me) that a few tourists break away from their guided tour to follow at an eavesdroppable distance. In between anecdotes about the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion, he speaks of his childhood, but only after a bit of cajoling: a loving (and genius) mother and father who sometimes didn’t know what to do with their imperious (and often impetuous) son. A posh, yet grounded upbringing filled with the best schools money could buy. He recites these facts as one would a grocery list and it isn’t until we reach Ancient Egypt and the conversation turns to theatre that those expressive features – the ones he’s won awards for – light up.

His disdain, yet respect for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the prestigious program that trained him, mirrors that of a teenager going through some rather rebellious years. His bark has very little bite when he speaks of honing his craft, but when we get to the Stratford production of Romeo and Juliet, he truly opens up. Shakespeare is his passion and it’s never been more evident as he talks of the role that launched his career and marked his first collaboration with director Greg Lestrade. The pair have now made five plays together over the past ten years, including the currently running and oft-lauded Macbeth.

“He’s a tosser, but a brilliant one,” Lestrade had said the week prior with a paternal smile. “And I wouldn’t have him any other way.”

“Would you say this production has changed him?”

Lestrade stared off, perhaps recounting some unseen memory, before a soft smile graced his features. “Yeah. Yeah, I’d say so. But in what way, you’d have to ask the man himself.”

So I do when we get to the Impressionists, but Holmes hedges the question. What little privacy he’s earned has been hard won after over a decade in the business and a particularly bad bout of press a few years ago. When asked about it, his eyes shutter and his mood darkens, proof enough of the tone of that time. He may be willing to tell you the entire lineage of Seti I, but the rest of his life, he keeps closely guarded.
“Favorite artist?” I ask as we leave Monet behind.

“Van Gogh,” he replies without missing a beat. “His command of color is unparalleled. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty. Pain is easy to portray, but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world…” Holmes trails off, seemingly lost for a moment, and the similarities between the two are not such a stretch to make: An artist misunderstood. A match in need of a spark. A master of color in need of the right instrument.

Despite his ardor, we do not visit the painter's wing and one gets the sense that those particular respects, too, are paid in private.

We end up on the Met's rooftop bar, the spring clouds breaking up and letting the sun shine over the park we traversed mere hours ago.

“Why is it not called Central Park East?” he asks after a moment.

I stare at him blankly. Lestrade had warned me that Holmes’ attention shifts faster than a gale force wind.

“8th Avenue becomes Central Park West when it hits the park, but 5th Avenue remains 5th Avenue until it dead ends into the Harlem River at 143rd St. Why is it not Central Park East?”

It’s a valid question and one to which I have no answer.

I decide to make a shift of my own:

“And what of John Watson?”

Holmes smiles in a way that is completely unguarded before remembering whose company he’s keeping. His answer, when it comes though, is entirely unabashed.

“He is my conductor of light.”

A necessary instrument for a master of color.

Chapter End Notes

- Justitia is the Roman goddess of justice
- Andrew Rannells originated the role of Elder Price in The Book of Mormon and has a recurring role on Girls. He recently just covered Jonathan Groff for a month in Hamilton so Groffsauce could film the Looking series finale.
- The Drama League Luncheon is just that - a lunch. The nominees are literally onstage at tiered tables while their fellow actors, directors, and producers are on at round tables in the ballroom. There's an open bar. It's dangerous. They also honor both Broadway and Off-Broadway performances, unlike the Tony Awards which are strictly for Broadway.
- Eddie Redmayne won a Tony Award (and the Drama League Award) for the John Logan play Red. He starred in it with Alfred Molina as Mark Rothko.
- Brian is Brian d'Arcy James. Kelli is Kelli O'Hara. We discussed them earlier.
- The remark about Wicked is not my opinion. I fucking love Wicked.
- Everything about Cleopatra's Needle is true. Thanks, Wikipedia.
- I definitely borrowed (sometimes verbatim) lines regarding Van Gogh from Vincent and the Doctor. I figured Moffat wouldn't mind. And to be perfectly honest, he said it best.
Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On

Chapter Summary

Nate is quiet for a moment before asking, "You guys all good?"

"Hmm?" John murmurs as he slips into his trousers and fumbles with the clasp.

"You and Sherlock. You good now?"

And John pauses because the hesitation and genuine hope in Nate's voice makes him remember that he's not the only one rooting for this relationship to succeed.

Chapter Notes

You GUYS. The penultimate chapter! We made it! This essentially wraps up the story and next will be an epilogue, but fear not! I love this universe and will definitely be posting some one-shots and other little ficlets in it.

Thank you for the amazing comments, kudos, and bookmarks (some of those tags are hilar). They truly have kept me going. You're all gems and I adore you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."
- The Tempest, Act IV, scene i

“And that’s our show for Sunday, June 8th, also known as Tony Day. Please return your seat-backs and tray tables to their upright and locked positions,” Sally announces over the headset, pulling it off and untangling it from her hair as she enters the already bustling hallway from her stage manager perch.

The energy is addictive - electric - a much different change of pace from their usual post-Sunday slump. After all, eight shows a week takes its toll. But now, her actors are practically vibrating with energy - teasing each other over their respective beauty regimens and mocking their various tie choices.
"Oi! No running!" she yells when Kevin goes flying past her, brandishing a garment bag like a Superman cape. It's like a grammar school playground in here sometimes.

She thinks of her own dress hanging on the back of the door to the stage management office and smiles. Martha is hosting a viewing party at Glass House Tavern just up a couple of blocks for those in the cast and crew unable to attend the actual awards. Which is why her actors are absolutely *losing* their minds. Any excuse to party, really, and this is as good an excuse as any. Particularly when it includes an open bar.

The only two she hasn't seen are John and Sherlock; not since the cast surprised them at the curtain call by parting like the Red Sea, singling them out with the kind of loud and raucous ovation born only from that deep brotherly love her boys share. And they're all boys in her mind - even cranky, old Ian - and they're going to celebrate the shit out of the leaders of their little troupe.

If only they can find them.

xxxxxx

"SHERLOCK!" John bellows, opening the door to his dressing room. "Did you steal my tux – ? Oh." he pauses when Nate appears around the corner, holding said tux and giving him an expression that reads something along the lines of, 'What the hell is wrong with you?'

"Easy, soldier. It's called steaming. It's what we dressers do."

John sheepishly grins and beckons him inside.

"Though I appreciate that when something goes wrong or missing, you immediately blame Sherlock. That's a comfort," Nate teases as he hangs the suit up and goes straight to fixing John's collar.

“Last weekend, he made off with my best cufflinks to test a new alloy against actual platinum. I’m shocked they made it through unscathed.”

Nate raises his eyebrows. “Does he often do that?”

“Often enough,” John grumbles.

Nate is quiet for a moment before asking, "You guys all good?"

"Hmm?" John murmurs as he slips into his trousers and fumbles with the clasp.

"You and Sherlock. You good now?"

And John pauses because the hesitation and genuine hope in Nate's voice makes him remember that he's not the only one rooting for this relationship to succeed.

"Yeah, we're good, Nate." He smiles. "Better than good."

Nate nods once, firmly, and holds out John's tux jacket so he can slip into it. "Keep it that way," he orders with a smile and John laughs in the mirror as he smooths the material over his shoulders.

"I'm working on it." John turns sideways and examines himself in mirror. "By the way, have you seen him? He disappeared after curtain. I just assumed Tara was wrestling him into his tuxedo."

Nate pauses as he folds up John's clothes for the laundry, and it's just enough for John to take notice.

"Nate?" he prompts, like one does to a child who's done something particularly naughty.
"Tara's going to kill me," he mutters, looking towards the heavens. "Sherlock's on the roof, but you didn't hear it from me."

"Why is he – ? Oh son of a bitch." Tara smokes - it's one of Sherlock's favorite things about his dresser. Well, that and her wicked sense of humor. "I'll kill him."

"Wait," Nate manages to snag John around the waist before he grabs the door handle. "Before you murder your boyfriend, here," he says, thrusting a small wrapped package in John's hand.

"What's this?"

"A thank you gift."

"Nate. You didn't have to do this."

Nate shrugs and watches as John digs into the wrapping paper, unveiling a small box. He pops the lid off and inhales sharply for nestled in the velvet inside are two silver hexagonal cufflinks. John gently removes the first one and reads the JW etched in the metal.

"Nate," he murmurs. "That's too much."

"After four shows and seven years, it's not enough," Nate simply replies. "Now look at the other one."

John's brows draw together in confusion - surely, the cufflinks are the same - but then he takes a look at its partner to find SH etched into its face.

John swallows thickly as he holds it up to the light. "You've engraved it in metal," he chuckles, voice rough. "That's a lot of faith you're putting in this relationship."

"Nah," Nate replies. "I'm pretty confident."

John finally looks up and hugs his dresser - the man who's talked him through stage fright, bad reviews, and ex-girlfriends. Who's wiped blood (real and fake) from his face as well as countless tears. Who's made him laugh when he needed it and taught him what the hell American baseball actually is.

John clears his throat and pulls away, British emotional restraint firmly back in place.

"Thank you," he murmurs and Nate nods. John gestures towards the door. "I ought to find Sherlock. And break every single cigarette Tara has managed to slip him."

"Don't get any blood on your suit!" Nate yells as John disappears, laughter following him down the hall.

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Sherlock hears the door and doesn't have to turn around to know it's John. It's obvious that Tara gave him up to Nate and Nate crumbled under John's scrutiny (as most men would, so Sherlock can't really fault him for it). Still, he'll have to have a chat with Tara about the meaning of "what happens in the dressing room, stays in the dressing room."

He takes one last pull on the cigarette and stubs it out on the concrete wall in front of him, turning to find John glaring at him in entirely too delicious a manner.

"Just the one."
John's eyes narrow even further (as if that were possible), but his lips twitch in an effort not to smile. "I hope you don't expect me to kiss you with that mouth."

"I have mints."

"Not good enough," John laughs, even as he grabs Sherlock's lapels and crashes their lips together. "Nerves?" he asks, nodding at the cigarette butt and Sherlock shrugs, placing his hands on John's waist.

"Nerves? How pedestrian."

"Yet how human," John replies with a wink and Sherlock's breath catches. He's so lovely like this: in the early evening sunlight hanging over the Hudson. It's just after 5pm and they have to be at Radio City in a bit to begin the red carpet. But for now, Sherlock has John and a roof and a view, and there's nowhere else he'd rather be in this moment.

"Whatever happens tonight," John begins, clearing his throat, "I want you to know how proud I am of you."

Sherlock's lips part, but John holds his hand up, halting whatever reply had been about to come. He doesn't really have a particular one in mind, but it sounds like things are getting emotional and it's too early in the evening for that.

John glances at him knowingly. "I know you don't go in for that sentiment stuff, but it had to be said."

Sherlock nods, gently running his lips along John's hairline. "Thank you. Come on. We'll be late."

"For what? We don't have to go for a while yet."

"Oh for the surprise champagne toast they're gathering for downstairs."

John groans and gives him a playful shove. "Can't you just, like, let it happen? Ignore that genius brain of yours and let someone be surprised for once?"

"Mm, unlikely."

John shakes his head and heads for the door, but Sherlock cannot let him reach it. Not without telling him how much he means to him, how badly he needs him by his side; how very much he's changed the course of his life.

"John?"

"What, you prat?" John chuckles as he turns, sobering slightly when he catches sight of Sherlock's intense expression. "What is it?" he asks more softly.

"You're right. I don't go in for that sentiment stuff," he blurts out, standing a little straighter as John tilts his head in that endearing way he loves. "But it's an honor sharing that stage with you."

John smiles a smile bright enough to eclipse the sun beginning to dip behind the skyscrapers and Sherlock cannot breathe.

"Prat," John whispers, holding his hand out and wiggling his fingers until Sherlock takes them, allowing himself to be lead out of the light and into the dark.

That'll have to do.
The camera comes to life to show a close-up shot of Sean's excited face before spinning around and catching the back of Molly's dress as she peers through a crack in a door. A few muttered "shhh's" are heard along with copious amounts of giggling.

Molly: [turning around and scurrying off camera] They're coming, be quiet!

[More giggles. More shushing.]

Sean: Yo, shut the hell up.

Sally: [off camera] Nice, Sean.

Sean: I do what I can.

[Molly squeaks as the door begins to open and Greg's voice can be heard]

Greg: Why do you two look like something's about to jump out -

Everyone: SURPRISE!

Greg: [stumbling back] JESUS.

[John and Sherlock double over laughing as various cast members come up and congratulate them. The camera swings around to focus on Sean's face once more.]

Sean: Nailed it.

They walk the red carpet together this time, fingers entwined, smiles wide. John can feel Sherlock tense beside him every time someone yells in their direction, which being a red carpet, is often. Mike steers them to the friendlier members of the press and John's thumb remains ghosting over Sherlock's knuckles until the tension eases once more.

They eventually make it into the lobby, which is decked out in red velvet and gold finishing – just as any classic music hall should be – and it’s positively packed. The gowns that the women wear are the only pop of color amidst the sea of black and white tuxedos, and in this moment, John is thoroughly wishing he had taken up Greg’s offer of a flask.

“Jesus Christ,” he murmurs just as Irene appears with Harry at her side.

“You forgot your very gorgeous and fully supportive dates,” Irene drawls.

“You said to meet you inside!” John defends as Sherlock replies, “And yet you found us anyway.”

John ignores him and kisses Irene and then Harry on the cheek. “Trust me, you didn’t want any part of that insanity outside.”

“Oh I don’t know. I enjoy a good interrogation,” Irene winks as Harry snorts. “I come bearing gifts,” she announces, handing John the flask Greg offered him earlier.

“Oh bless you,” he murmurs, taking a long pull of what turns out to be very good scotch, as Harry narrows her eyes in a teasingly concerned manner.
“John Watson!” someone shouts and he turns to find Mikey Cushing, one of his sailors from *Anything Goes*, bounding towards him and enveloping him in a bone-crushing hug. “How the hell are ya?”

“Good,” John laughs as Mikey lowers him back to the ground and glances over his shoulder at Sherlock.

“Mikey Cushing,” the man says, holding out his hand, which Sherlock carefully takes after a moment.

“Mikey,” Sherlock replies in a tone that says he cannot believe a grown man would willingly go by *Mikey*. John elbows him.

“But of course I know who you are,” Mikey continues. “Big fan. And damn, John, had I known I had a chance, I would have hit on you way back when.”

“*You did* hit on me way back when.”

“Not hard enough. Clearly,” Mikey replies with a wink, clapping both of them on the shoulders. “Congrats on the noms… and, you know, other things.” He grins devilishly and is off to tackle some other poor, unsuspecting soul.

Sherlock’s gone tense again and John’s about to turn to tell him that really nothing happened, but Sherlock is murmuring “looo” against his ear before he has the chance, and John sincerely hopes his full-body shiver wasn’t as pronounced as it felt.

“Wait for your ball and chain. Harry and I are going to find our seats,” Irene announces. “It’s getting to be that time and Sherlock has a habit of wandering off.”

“Don’t I know it,” John replies, and he surprises even himself by the bit of bitterness panging in his chest. He’s forgiven Sherlock, and won’t hold it against him at all, but it still stings. The pain of those days without him are not as distant a memory as he’d like them to be.

Harry gives him one last knowing smile as she allows Irene to drag her into the throngs entering the hall. John wanders down one level towards the loos to wait for Sherlock by the bar, trying to blend into the wall so he can quell the butterflies in his stomach.

"Lost?"

John freezes, turning slowly to find Mary standing at the bottom of the staircase. She looks good in her emerald green gown, but John can’t spare a thought for social niceties.

“What do you want?”

“John, don’t be like that,” she pleads, taking a step.

He scoffs and shakes his head, halting her approach. “Stay there, please.”

“John – ” and she actually looks hurt this time, like he’s the one who’s done her some great wrong.

“How’d the video get out there, Mary? Hm?” He smiles tightly in the terrifying way he’s mastered over the past few weeks of playing Macbeth and Mary’s eyes widen, lips parted as she sucks in a breath. “Because I know *I* didn’t send it. And it certainly wasn’t Sherlock or Harry. And we’re the only three who had it.”
She blinks a few times, fingers toying with the fringe on her clutch. “I didn’t mean –”

“What, to out me? To out Sherlock? You didn’t mean to make a relationship that I care deeply about public without my or my partner’s consent?”

Her eyes darken at the mention of Sherlock’s name and he huffs out a chuckle that contains little warmth or humor.

“You don’t get it, do you? This isn’t a phase. I’m not coming back. I love him.”

“You used to love me,” she replies hotly and he can’t quite believe the words are coming out of her mouth. Like she hadn’t taken everything he had given her and thrown it back in his face.

“You left me. No, you know what?” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m not doing this with you.” His cold gaze finds her. “You’re not worth it.”

She reels back as if slapped and John steps away from her, fixing his new cufflinks as he goes.

“You come after us again and I won’t be so forgiving. And neither will Sherlock’s brother.”

“His brother?” she spits. “Does Sherlock himself care so little?”

John smirks. “Oh you burned that bridge a long time ago and he’s not one for second chances.”

He turns and finds Sherlock watching him from the doorway of the gents, eyes cool and calculating as that brilliant brain assesses the situation. John strides up to him, but Sherlock’s eyes remain on Mary, and John would not want to be on the receiving end of that glare. Not ever.

“Come on,” he murmurs. “Show’s about to start.”

“Mm,” Sherlock grunts, gaze still firmly focused on Mary’s retreating form.

“Hey.” John takes his hands and slides their fingers together. “This is our night, yeah?”

Sherlock nods, finally glancing down at John when the shorter man tugs on his sleeve.

“Forget it. Forget her. She can’t hurt us anymore.”

“She never did,” Sherlock replies, before bringing their clasped hands to his lips and placing a kiss on John’s knuckles. “She created a minor annoyance that caused me to have a major lapse in judgment, and for that, I refuse to give her credit.”

“Oi, gents!” Greg yells from the bottom of the stairs. “The orchestra’s warming up. If you don’t get your arses in there, you’ll miss Neil’s opening number.”

“I do love a good opening number,” Sherlock replies and it’s so sincere, so genuine, that John can’t help but bark out a laugh and pull him down for a kiss.

“Come on, you maniac.”

The opening number is, without a doubt, everything Sherlock had hoped for, and the standing ovation it receives goes on for far longer than the telecast’s producers would probably like. Oh well. Nobody really likes the local news anyway.
He glances to his left to find John positively beaming even as a few of the departing chorus members wave to him in the audience. And since Sherlock has memorized John’s CV and the CV’s of everyone he’s ever worked with, he can recall exactly which musicals they starred in together.

Eventually, the massive amounts of actors clear the stage, making way for the first of the presenters. He knows his category is towards the beginning, but he doesn’t quite expect it to be immediately after the opening number.

“John,” he whispers hotly as Zachary Quinto and Audra McDonald stride out with that blasted envelope in hand.

And John, bless him, merely reaches over and takes his hand, eyes never straying from the glittering stage ahead of them.

Irene is rapidly tapping her heel, making her legs bounce where they’re crossed at the knee. It’s doing nothing to soothe Sherlock’s suddenly (and embarrassingly) frayed nerves. Sherlock Holmes doesn’t get nervous. Before a show, perhaps, but not for awards. He’s lived his life thinking they were beneath him. The Work came first, and if there was an accolade, so be it. He didn’t need the recognition of his colleagues to validate his contribution to the craft. Irene always wanted it more than he did, but now, in this moment, he wants it badly. And that’s terrifying.

Audra steps up to the mic first and smiles, gaze seeming to find each of them in the crowd. “It is our pleasure to present the first award of the night to one of these fine actors who created moments so wondrous and inspiring that, apart from applause, the most fitting recognition for their stellar work is a nomination from their peers.”

“Breathe,” John whispers calmly, but Sherlock knows it’s a front. He’s just as nervous as he is because he can feel the flitting of John’s pulse. He glances to John’s left to find Harry gripping tight to her brother’s forearm, and something warm blooms in his chest. At least they’re all in this together.

Zachary clears his throat. “This amazing array of artists made contributions that were invaluable and that added to the excitement of the theatre this season. The nominees for Best Featured Actor in a Play are: Stephen Boyer, Lend Me a Tenor, John Cariani, Noises Off!, Sherlock Holmes, Macbeth, Tony Shaloub, Golden Boy, and Russell Tovey, A View from the Bridge.”

“And the Tony Award goes to…” Audra hands the envelope to Zachary.

“Sherlock Holmes, Macbeth!”

His name doesn’t sound like his own, but it must be because Irene is leaping out of her seat and clapping like her life depends on it.

“That’s you, love,” John is murmuring against his ear, laughing, voice tight, and Sherlock glances up to find tears in his eyes.

“I love you,” he whispers because he can’t think of anything else to say. He’s never felt this level of happiness before and he feels like he’s drowning.

“I love you, too,” John replies, leaning forward and pecking him on the mouth, before nodding towards the stage.

He stands on shaky legs after that, buttoning up his jacket only from muscle memory. He feels a little shove on his back and he suspects that’s Irene's doing as he trips towards the stairs leading to the stage. Audra gives him a kiss on the cheek and Zachary hugs him, which is odd since he has never met Zachary before and Sherlock’s not exactly the hugging type. The fact that he allowed it (possibly
even initiated it) is John’s fault, most likely.

The Tony Award is lighter than he expected, but still feels foreign in his hand. He’s played in countless theatres and for thousands of patrons, but as he looks up into the overwhelmingly massive hall that is Radio City, he feels infinitely small.

“Hello,” he begins, voice echoing and startling him. “Er, thank you. Thanks very much. I’m, um…” he trails off, words failing him. For once, the moment might be too big for him to wrap his head around. “I am not an easy man to like, I’ve realized this,” he says, to the laughter of those in the audience. “I’ve frightened off many a fellow actor, a few directors, and god knows how many producers. I’ve openly mocked critics, scorned the considerable talents of my colleagues, and ignored those whose opinions were absolutely worthwhile.” He pauses, smiling sheepishly. “Sorry about that.” He focuses on a spot at the back of the house, if only to have something to tether himself to the decidedly out-of-body moment. “No, I am not an easy man to like, let alone love. Which is why it’s so miraculous that I’ve managed to garner the affection of that man over there. The Times’ Most Likeable Man on Broadway,” he says with affectation and the audience chuckles. “Shockingly, that’s one headline I cannot argue with. But more about John Watson in a minute. I am not so naïve to not realize this production was going to be the making or breaking of my career, and I have to thank, first, Greg Lestrade and Martha Hudson for their continuous faith despite my being a complete arsehole most of the time.” He freezes, realizing he’s just cursed on network television. “I assume they’ll bleep that out. Also, Irene Adler – the woman whose sole job it is to keep me in line. Never an easy or a pleasant task. She also makes a killer martini, and she’d have to, to be able to put up with me. Thank you, Irene. Truly.” Irene blows him a kiss and even from the stage, Sherlock can see the tears in her eyes. He should look to the man sitting just two seats down, but he can’t. Not yet. “To the cast and crew of *Macbeth*, you are the finest people I’ve ever had the pleasure and honor of working with. Thank you for letting me share the stage with you. And finally…” he trails off, throat suddenly gone tight. “And finally to John Watson.” He stares down at the award in his hand, silver circle catching the light. He cannot look at John, because if he does, he will not get through what he has to say. And he has to say this. “John Watson is the most exceptional man I have ever met. Kind, gracious, funny, mind-blowingly talented. It’s his bad luck that he fell for me, and my incredible good fortune that I fell for him. John,” he finally glances up, breath catching in his throat at the expression on John’s face, “you make me want to be a better person and that is perhaps the greatest gift I could ever be given. Thank you. I love you.”

He steps back from the mic, swallowing hard, and squinting in the stage lights as the applause begins. It’s when people start standing, though, that he’s really caught off-guard. He blinks owlishly, attempting to comprehend that people are standing for him. And he must be hallucinating, but then he feels Audra’s hand on his arm, and no, this is definitely happening. He begins to step offstage and catches a glimpse of John wiping at his cheeks as he stands, mouthing ‘I love you.’

There’s a noticeable gap in the ovation and Sherlock knows it’s where Moriarty and Mary Morstan are sitting. The thought doesn’t bother him in the slightest.

He vaguely registers stagehands and PAs applauding for him as Audra and Zachary lead him to the wings. Neil gives him an enthusiastic high five as he passes him along with a heartfelt “congratulations” and it’s enough to make Sherlock pause. He’s never been someone that people are happy for. But before he can contemplate it too much, he’s whisked to the pressroom where he thinks he answers his questions adequately, succinctly, and hopefully, somewhat charmingly.

Nothing really sinks in until he’s escorted through the lobby to get back to the music hall, and even then, it takes him two seconds longer than it should to notice Mycroft leaning against one of the columns, inspecting his cuticles.
“What the hell are you doing here?” Sherlock blurts out and Mycroft smiles as he straightens.

“What and miss my baby brother winning the long sought after Tony Award?”

“I wasn’t a guaranteed win,” Sherlock replies and Mycroft smirks.

“I had faith.”

And that’s perhaps what throws him for a loop most of all – Mycroft’s confidence in his abilities. For someone who went into this business solely because it irked his by-the-book older brother, it's remarkably heartwarming to hear the pride in Mycroft's voice.

Sherlock clears his throat because of course there’s another reason Mycroft is here other than supporting his wayward baby brother, as... nice as that support is.

“Do you still have what we talked about?” he asks.

“You mean the incriminating evidence against one James Moriarty?” Mycroft responds with a twitch of his lip. “I do.”

"The minute that envelope is opened, whether John wins or not, you release that information. Not a second before.”

“Understood,” Mycroft replies. “You know, a year ago, you wouldn’t have thought twice about destroying Moriarty if you weren’t in the direct line of fire.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes. “A year ago, I didn’t have John. And I refuse to put him in the crosshairs.”

Mycroft’s features soften and, it’s not quite a smile, but it’s close. Sherlock rolls his eyes.

“Don’t get sentimental on me now.”

“Never,” Mycroft says, clearing his throat. “Best get in there. It’s Gregory’s category next.”

Sherlock ducks his head and Mycroft squeezes his shoulder, before twirling his umbrella and sauntering outside.

After all, he’ll soon have calls to make.

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John turns around for the fourth time in as many minutes as Harry pinches his arm.

"Ow -"

“Pay attention. He’ll be back in a minute,” his sister murmurs and John huffs.

“You said that ten minutes ago.”

Sherlock has already missed Sarah and Ryan win their categories and Greg is up next. He’ll hate himself if he misses Best Director, despite how much he claims not to care. Irene has moved down a chair to allow the seat filler to take her place instead of Sherlock’s, and she places a perfectly manicured hand on his knee.

“Relax.”
“You don’t have anymore scotch in that flask, do you?” John asks.

“I do, but seeing as we’re in the front row and there are cameras everywhere, I feel that might be poor marketing.”

John groans and Irene squeezes his knee, just as Sherlock appears at the end of their row. If his heart positively leaps into his throat, John ignores it.

There’s a smattering of applause from their seatmates and Sherlock adorably ducks his head in thanks. Irene’s seat filler makes herself scarce and she scoots over, allowing Sherlock to take his rightful place next to John once more.

It takes every ounce of John’s considerable self-restraint to not snog him senseless.

"Hi," Sherlock says.

"Hi," John replies through a chuckle. They just stare at each other for a moment and it’s just the kind of soppy thing each of them hates, but it can’t be helped. “Sherlock, your speech – ”

His eyes widen. “Not good?”

John tilts his head, eyes pricking. “Good. Perfect. Perfectly good,” he murmurs, leaning forward to place a soft kiss on his cheekbone. “So, let’s see it.”

Sherlock holds out the award and John takes it in his hands.

"Lighter than I thought it’d be."

"You better put that in a place of honor," Irene says, "on your mantle under a spotlight. My hard work deserves some recognition."

John laughs and even Sherlock quirks a smile, leaning over a placing a kiss on her cheek.

"There will never be another like you, Irene."

"And don’t you forget it." She reaches over and takes the Tony John holds out for her, murmuring, "Hello, gorgeous," in her best Barbra voice.

They finally behave and settle down when Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Celia Keenan-Bolger walk out to present Best Director. John turns around and tries to catch Greg’s eye where he sits a few rows behind them but the man is too busy focusing on the stage. Next to him, Molly looks like she’s about to be sick, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

"And now the nominees for Best Direction of a Play," Jesse begins. "Through their ingenuity and inventiveness, they’ve enhanced their productions in service of the playwright. We honor their bold choices and creative ingenuity tonight."

"The nominees for Best Director of a Play are Sam Gold, A Streetcar Named Desire, Greg Lestrade, Macbeth, Joe Mantello, Lend Me a Tenor, Pam McKinnon, A View from the Bridge, and Trevor Nunn, Juniper Springs. And the Tony Award goes to..." Celia pauses as she opens the envelope, "Greg Lestrade, Macbeth!"

Harry, Sherlock, Irene, and John are quick to their feet and John turns in time to see Greg plant a kiss on Molly’s lips – her response to which is a squeak loud enough for John to hear from five rows away.
“Ta very much,” Greg says when he gets to the mic. “Working here always feels a bit like a homecoming and I can’t tell you how nice it is to have a place that welcomes you like that, both personally and professionally.” He grins down at the award before finding the Macbeth area in the audience. “I’d like to thank the always-exquisite Martha Hudson, without whom, none of this would be possible. It’s not easy to find a producer who puts their faith in you so implicitly and, Martha, the trust you’ve shown me can’t be repaid. I only hope I’ve done your production justice. And in turn, the fact that I have that kind of trust and bond with my cast is the greatest thing I could ask for as a director. This band of merry men has been responsible for the most joyous experience of my career. Particularly when it’s been led by the likes of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Gents, I can’t – can’t thank you enough.” He manages a smile in their direction before turning once more to the hall at large. “Thanks again, I’m very, very chuffed.”

Greg makes a goofy face at them like ‘Can you believe they gave me this? Again?’ and John laughs, clapping hard as Greg exits the stage. He knows they’re 4/6 so far with only two awards left: Best Actor and Best Revival. Neither is a sure bet and even John isn’t holding his breath. As much as it pains him to admit it, his money is on Moriarty – the man’s won a few of the other major awards, save for the Drama League, which he lost to Sherlock. And John hasn’t won any. He doesn’t mind, really. He never went into this for the awards, and frankly, the show itself was gift enough, but to lose to Moriarty… John would rather eat glass.

The rest of the show goes by in a blur of fancy gowns and musical numbers, and the closer and closer they get to his category, the more convoluted the knots in his stomach become. By the time they get to Best Actress, Harry has his elbow in a death grip, Sherlock is cutting off circulation to his fingers, and Irene has torn her program into shreds.

Mercifully, Mary does not win and John thanks fate for small favors. He tries to remember to pay attention during Jessica Hecht’s speech – she is a friend, after all – but all he can think about is that there are mere minutes until his category. And he’s so focused on this fact that he barely registers Glenn Close walking out, envelope in hand.

Harry's fist thwacking him in the shoulder remedies that, however.

"Fuck me," he murmurs and Sherlock grins beside him.

“Later.”

John rolls his eyes. “Cheeky bastard.”

“You love me,” Sherlock whispers, nuzzling his nose in the spot just below John’s ear.

“God help me, I do.” John clears his throat and Irene mutters “Keep it in your pants” as Glenn steps up to the mic, looking regal per usual.

“And now five men whose courageous performances moved us to tears and laughter, warmed our hearts, provoked our minds, and touched our souls. For their exceptional portrayals in revivals and exciting new works, the nominees for Best Performance by Leading Actor in a Play are Brian d’Arcy James, Lend Me a Tenor, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Juniper Springs, John Hawkes, The Homecoming, James Moriarty, A Streetcar Named Desire, and John Watson, Macbeth. And the Tony Award goes to…”


“… John Watson, Macbeth.”
White noise.

That’s all he hears.

His jaw has popped open and Harry and Sherlock are each pressing into his sides. Harry kisses his cheek and Sherlock just rests his forehead against John’s temple. He blinks numbly up at Glenn, who’s smiling widely and holding the Tony up as if to say ‘Come and get it, you silly boy.’

He slowly stands and is firmly tackled by Irene and then Mike, who’s appeared magically from somewhere behind them.

Mike grabs his face and fiercely murmurs, “I knew it. I bloody knew it.”

And John is glad someone did, because at the moment, he isn’t even sure he knows his own name.

On the first step, he realizes the audience is beginning to stand. On the third, his throat tightens so much that he’s pretty confident the only sound he’ll be able to make is a sob. It isn’t until he’s hugging Glenn and stepping in front of the mic that he realizes the entire house, including the mezzanine and balcony, are on their feet.

"Bloody hell," he whispers, which of course gets picked up by the mic, causing the audience to laugh. “Um, cheers. I wasn’t - I didn't..." he trails off and sort of lets his arms flap by his sides. "I should have prepped a bit, I think.” He chuckles, but it dies quickly, the roughness creeping back into his voice once more. What should he say? How does one navigate a moment like this?

But then he glances at Sherlock – Sherlock, who's looking at him as if he personally hung the sun and the stars – and everything becomes clear.

"As many of you know by now, I sort of stumbled on this profession. One can only get shot at for long, I guess." The audience chuckles again and John exhales sharply. "I think it’s safe to say I wasn’t expecting this. I wouldn't have picked me, but bloody hell, I'm glad you did." He grips the award in his sweaty palm and swallows hard. "I, um, I have to thank my agent Mike Stamford, for sticking by my side since we were kids. Not bad for a showbiz marriage, eh?” Mike laughs and places his hand over his heart. "To Dame Martha Hudson, for putting me forward to begin with. To Greg Lestrade, for creating such a brilliant and beautiful piece of theatre. I can’t believe this is the job I get to go to everyday. To my cast, the handsomest cast to ever walk the boards,” he laughs. “But in all seriousness, I never would have made it to first preview let alone on this stage without you and your talent, your love, and your support.” There are a few whoops in the audience and the teleprompter is flashing, telling him to wrap it up. God not yet, he thinks. “To Harry, for being the best date and the best sister a guy could ask for. Despite being four years younger and three inches shorter, she could kick my arse seven ways from Sunday.” Harry laughs through her tears and John finally manages to glance to her right. To Sherlock, who’s still staring at him with that gobsmacked expression. John doesn’t ever want it to go away. “There's someone left – don't worry I haven't forgotten.” His smile is cheeky, but he daren't look away. “Thing is, if I attempt to say what needs to be said, I'm not sure I'll get through it. So I'll just say this: Sherlock Holmes, you are the most human, human being I have ever known. I was so alone and I owe you so much. This show brought me to you and I cannot ask for any greater reward than that. I love you so much. Thank you. “

His adrenaline is making his heart race faster than a Triple-Crown winner and he truly thinks that if he doesn’t exit this stage soon, he might collapse upon it. Luckily, Glenn is taking his elbow and telling him congratulations as she walks him offstage, and thank goodness too because he’s pretty sure he wouldn’t have found his way to the wings otherwise. Everything is topsy-turvy, but at least there are well-trained PAs directing him to the press room.
He manages two photo ops and one vaguely coherent sound bite before a cheer erupts from the other side of the room.

It’s Best Revival for *Macbeth*.

xxxxxx

Sherlock allows himself to be led onstage by Molly, who’s been led onstage by Greg, who’s standing behind Martha as she gladly accepts the Tony Award Hugh Jackman is offering her.

Sherlock is pretty sure an inappropriate come-on sneaks its way into the brief conversation, but luckily the microphone doesn’t pick it up.

He keeps glancing to his right because John *needs* to be here, and something finally unclenches in his chest when the man himself bounds out a moment later, drawing applause as he nestles up to Sherlock’s side and drapes his other arm over Greg’s shoulder.

Sherlock honestly couldn’t be arsed to remember what Mrs. Hudson says. He assumes someone (*ahem* Irene) has hidden her herbal soothers, so it should be somewhat cogent. But his entire focus, his entire *world*, has lasered in on the man beside him.

“Hey,” John whispers, nudging him.

“Yes?” Sherlock smiles, catching his eye.

“We’re Tony winners.” He says it like a giddy school boy and Sherlock can’t help but chuckle naughtily beside him. Replying would be redundant, though, so he leans down and places a gentle peck on John’s lips instead. They’ve been more physically demonstrative in the last two hours than they have in the last two months and Sherlock finds he’s shockingly okay with it.

The times they are a-changin’.

As Martha wraps up her speech, Sherlock spies Moriarty sneaking out a back exit and he nudges John and nods in his direction.

"Where's he going?" John murmurs.

"Look at your phone," Sherlock replies with a smile.

“I will do when we’re not onstage at the fucking Tony Awards. Bit rude, that.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes but acquiesces. The minute they step foot in the wings, though, he pulls John’s phone out of his pocket (and possibly gropes a bit more than strictly necessary).

John throws him a heated gaze and turns the mobile off airplane mode. Immediately he’s flooded with congratulatory texts and emails, but amidst the onslaught of love is a breaking news notification from *The New York Times*:

*Tony-nominated actor James Moriarty accused of ballot fixing, sexual harassment, assault...*

John looks up at Sherlock, jaw slack. "How did you – ?"

"He’ll be apprehended before he reaches the lobby." Sherlock’s mouth quirks into a barely contained smile. "Mycroft says ‘Congratulations,’ by the way."

"You beautiful man," John breathes, grabbing him and crashing their lips together.
Sherlock vaguely registers a camera flash somewhere off to his right, but it feels as though he’s lived a lifetime in a matter of seconds, his not-inconsiderable brain recounting every minute moment that brought him to this place:

“I refuse to step foot on stage with that man.”

“We haven’t actually met, yet. I’m John.”
“Sherlock. Sherlock Holmes.”

“Are you convinced?”

“I know I might not seem up to snuff, but let me tell you, I can hold my own on a stage with the great Sherlock Holmes! “
“Quite. Dinner?”

“Sherlock Holmes, are you trying to apologize?”
“No, I – Possibly.”

“Give John Watson Macbeth. I guarantee you won’t regret it.”

“Are we in a rehearsal room?”
“Not last I checked.”

“I remember, John. And I’m so very, very sorry.”
“Hey. You may be sorry, but... I’m not.”

“Think we can pull this off?”
“I don’t know.”

“I don’t care what happened four years ago. I care that you’re with me. Tonight and every night after. Can you do that?”
“You fascinate me.”

“I want to take this slow, but I also need you to touch me.”
“Where?”
“Christ Almighty, everywhere.”

“I’m not giving him up.”
“I’m not asking you to.”

“I’m in love with you.”

“I do, too. Love you, I mean. I love you, too.”

“Are you all right?”
“What?”
“I said are you all right.”

“I love you.”
“I know.”
“I’m still angry.”
“I remember.”

“I love you.”
“I’m sorry.”
“I forgive you.”
“I love you too.”

“He is my conductor of light.”

**Conductor of light, conductor of light, conductor of light.**

Another camera flash sparks behind his closed eyelids and he pulls away with a gasp, staring into John’s eyes – a blue sea from which he never wants to be rescued.

And it’s that photo that makes the front page of *The New York Times*. That photo that is splashed all over Theatermania and BroadwayWorld and Broadway.com. That photo which will eventually be framed and placed on a shared mantle, halfway between two Tony Awards.

Sherlock cups John’s face in his hands and brings their foreheads together.

There is nowhere in this world, or any other, he would rather be.

xxxxxx

On the Scene with Playbill:

"John, do you have a second for Playbill.com?"

"I always have a second for Playbill.com!" Watson replies, giddy smile lighting up his already animated features as he wanders over, Tony in hand.

"How does it feel?"

"Bloody fantastic," he blurs out, before laughing self-consciously. "I honestly wasn’t... I didn’t prepare. I didn’t have any expectations."

"So that heartfelt speech wasn’t planned in advance?"

"God no. Was it heartfelt? I can’t remember what I said at all!” he replies, yet he smiles quietly, secretly, as if he knows exactly what he said.

"So what’s next for you?"

"Tonight? A cocktail, I think. Maybe a celebratory snog." He's got a naughty smirk on his face, but his cheeks redden, as if he can’t quite believe he just said that. It's charming.

"A well-earned cocktail and snog, I'm sure. And beyond tonight?"

Watson stares off to the other side of the room, eyes eventually finding and fixing on Holmes who's giving his own interview a dozen feet away.

"I'm just content to be playing his husband for now."

Perhaps feeling his ears burning, Holmes glances up and they lock eyes.

One gets the feeling that there’s no ‘just’ about it.

Chapter End Notes
- The Tonys are usually hosted at Radio City Music Hall on 6th Avenue between 50th and 51st St next to Rockefeller Center, except for the couple of years when Cirque du Soleil took up a summer residence there and bumped the Tonys to the much smaller Beacon Theatre on Broadway and 74th St. Sadly, they'll be there again this summer.
- If you want a good Tony Award opening number, google the one from 2013. It's unbelievable. "Go, Neil, go!"
- As I hope everyone knows, "Hello, Gorgeous" is a quote from "Funny Girl," which Barbra Streisand won the Oscar for. #FannyBrice
- Jesse Tyler Ferguson stars as Mitch on Modern Family. He originated the role of Leaf Coneybear in the Tony-winning 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, along with Celia Keenan-Bolger who played Olive.
- There are approximately 700 eligible Tony voters. They are voting members of The Broadway League and the American Theatre Wing, members of the governing boards of Actors' Equity Association; the Dramatists Guild; SDC, the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society; United Scenic Artists; and the Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers.
Think But This and All is Mended

Chapter Summary

It’s been nearly six years since they last shared the stage.

Since they each walked off with a pair of Tonys to prop up Sherlock’s Shakespeare criticism alongside John’s mystery stories on the shelf after they moved in together.

It’s been nearly six years – and Sherlock has never been so angry at John in his life.

Chapter Notes

Darlings! It's been a privilege and a pleasure. x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
if you pardon, we will mend”

- A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act V Scene i

It’s been nearly six years since they last shared the stage.

Since they each walked off with a Tony Award to prop up Sherlock’s Shakespeare criticism alongside John’s mystery stories on the shelf after they moved in together.

It’s been nearly six years – and Sherlock has never been so angry at John in his life.

He yanks the door to Harvey Nichols open and all but stalks to the fifth floor, too frustrated to even be flattered by the way shoppers and employees alike scurry out of his path.

The hostess’ eyes barely have time to widen before he’s blowing by her towards the glass door of the terrace, gaze already scanning Irene’s usual table in the corner, pleased that she only has one empty martini glass in front of her. It is barely noon, after all.

He folds himself into the chair across from her with little grace or ceremony, and she raises a barely perceptible eyebrow before glancing over her shoulder. “Shall I call emergency services? Isn’t that usually what one does when property damage occurs due to a natural disaster?”

Normally, he musters a sense of sarcasm for her efforts but he hasn’t the energy.

“What? No sympathy smile?” Irene leans back, bringing her empty glass with her. “Christ, now I
know it’s bad. As if you calling before 11am on a Sunday and saying, ‘Knightsbridge. Now.’ wasn’t clue enough.”

But Sherlock merely glares because he really doesn’t want to get into it until he’s at least one vodka soda deep. And sure enough, the waiter appears a moment later, seamlessly trading out Irene’s empty glass with a full one as he simultaneously places another said vodka soda in front of Sherlock. Sherlock makes a note to tip him well.

Irene takes another sip and sighs. “Are we eating or is this a drinking brunch?”

“Can’t it be both?” Sherlock grumbles yet dives into the menu anyway.

“Eating willingly. Are you running a fever?” Irene reaches over to feel his forehead and Sherlock smacks her hand away. “Oh I’ve missed this. Us. London,” she teases.

Sherlock rolls his eyes and buries his nose in the menu once more.

“I assume this is John-related, since only John can get you this riled up so early on your day off. Both in the fun and not-so-fun way.” She winks and he takes a big gulp of his drink, because if they’re going to do this, he needs some liquid fortification.

“It’s not my day off. Opening’s on Tuesday, or did you forget that little fact?”

And now she looks concerned. “Sherlock, you have a show this evening.”

“And a drink in the morning won’t hurt it.”

She doesn’t look pleased, but she remains quiet, and he thanks heaven for small mercies.

“John’s become distant,” he says after a moment and Irene quirks an annoyingly arched eyebrow.

“Of course he is. You know the role he’s playing. It’s not easy.”

“It’s not supposed to be easy. But then we come home, shake it off, and go about our business. That’s how it works. That’s the job!” He takes another sip of his drink, barely tasting the bite of the vodka as it slides down his throat.

They’re playing Ned Weeks and Felix Turner in The Normal Heart. A gay rights advocate and his lover at the start of the AIDS crisis in the early ‘80s, a time before the epidemic even had a name.

Nothing about this production is easy.

Their return to sharing the stage has been trumpeted on both sides of the pond, building expectations and setting high bars, which both he and John are desperate to clear. They’ve been in previews for a couple of weeks, opening in just a matter of days. Early word of mouth is spectacular and audiences are leaving with their tears ducts a little emptier and their hearts a little more open, but the toll is… steep. And both he and John are paying it.

“Sherlock,” Irene sighs, “he has to watch you die every day.”

“He watched me die in Macbeth! Hell, we both died!”

“Not like this,” is her quiet reply. “Sherlock, this is different. You know it is.”

“How?” he asks, not unlike a petulant child.
“You might be good at compartmentalizing – at drawing that line in the sand between yourself and Felix when you go home at the end of the night, but John – it lingers a bit more for him. And Ned Weeks is a tough character to hold hands with.”

Sherlock looks to the building opposite, admiring its architecture if only to ignore the problem at hand for a moment longer. She’s right. He knows she is and he knows this because he goes home at the end of the day feeling like someone has opened his thoracic cavity with a dull knife and carved his heart out with a dirty spoon.

He can only imagine what John feels. And he has imagined it. In his nightmares and his waking hours. There’s a room in his mind palace that’s been barricaded shut, filled with images and scenarios all ending with John’s imminent demise.

“Sherlock?”

“Hm? What?” He snaps back to attention to find Irene staring at him in a way that’s not quite pity, but it’s close. It’s hateful.

“I said, ‘Where is he now?’”

Sherlock picks at his napkin and decides on eggs benedict, despite his lack of appetite. John will be pleased he’s eaten. If he remembers to ask. “Harry, Clara, and Lu just flew in. He’s getting them settled.”

“Lovely. You got the suit options I sent over to Baker Street?”

“Indeed. Decided on the McQueen.”

“Figured you would.” Irene takes another sip and rattles off a complex order for an egg white omelet when the waiter returns. She waits until the gentleman has collected their menus and is a safe distance away before leaning her elbows on the table. “How old is Lu now?”

Sherlock clears his throat, but can’t help a fond smile for his niece. “Four.”

“Christ, that old?”

“Harry’s not one to let grass grow under her. They were living together before Macbeth closed, married within the year, and Clara was pregnant eight months after that.”

Irene narrows her eyes, as if second-guessing what she’s about to say, and Sherlock knows what’s coming a second before it leaves her mouth. “And you really won’t let me tell the world that she’s John’s?”

“Absolutely not,” Sherlock snaps. “He didn’t offer up his genetics to his sister and her wife to pad your latest puff piece.”

She holds up her hands in defense and, yes, even Irene knows that John’s family is not to be moved about like a chess piece. In fact, Irene is their fiercest champion when someone attempts it. Sherlock loves her a bit for that.

“She looks like him,” he finds himself saying softly as he stares at his water glass. “She’s got Clara’s nose, but his eyes and coloring.”

He remembers the conversation as if it was yesterday – John hovering in the doorway of the kitchen while Sherlock sprawled on the couch, highlighting his lines for Coriolanus.
“What is it?” Sherlock sighs, glasses sliding down his nose. “You’re hovering and you only hover if you’ve broken something or you’re about to broach a serious topic. As I didn’t hear anything shatter, I have to assume it’s the latter rather than the former.”

John clears his throat, looking a bit like a deer caught in the headlights. “I had dinner with Harry.”

“So you said.”

“I did?”

“Earlier. You said, ‘I’m having dinner with Harry so make sure you remember to eat.’ I do actually pay attention to the things you say.”

“From time to time.” John smiles and Sherlock so prefers to see that soft delight over the nervous energy he’s still radiating.

“So?” he lifts his legs into the air, a clear indication that John is meant to sit. John does so and Sherlock rests his knees over John’s lap. “Out with it.”

“Harry and Clara are getting married.”

Sherlock frowns. “Have I missed something? Isn’t that meant to be good news?”

“That’s not – that’s not what…” John trails off and rubs his hands over his face as something unpleasant settles in Sherlock’s gut. He sits up, removing his legs from John’s lap, and scoots closer so his knees butt up against John’s thigh. His script falls to the floor unnoticed. “Harry and Clara want to have a child.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows shoot up. “That’s… good? Fast, but good?” He’s been trying to take his social cues from John, but right now, his stored list of standard reactions is bloody failing him.

“They need a donor.”

Ah. The penny drops.

Or rather, the penny thuds to the floor with the force of a two-ton anvil.

“And since you and Harriet share genetic material, they’ve asked you to ‘step up to the plate,’ as it were.”

John opens his mouth to reply, but then the words stall on his tongue. “Did you just use a baseball idiom?”

“Clearly I won’t be doing that again,” Sherlock mutters.

“Yeah,” John clears his throat again, resolutely avoiding Sherlock’s gaze. “Yeah. That’s the whole of it.”

“And…? That’s something you do or do not want to do?”

John huffs out a breath and leans back against the couch. Sherlock traces the collar of his shirt, letting his finger ghost across John’s skin.

“I don’t know,” John finally replies. “I mean – Yeah, I want to help Harry in any way I can. But this – it’d – when I imagined myself having kids, I thought, you know, that they’d be mine. But this baby will be mine biologically-speaking, but she won’t be mine.”
“And it’s not like the usual scenario where you make your donation and never see the child,” Sherlock concedes and John nods.

“She’ll be in my life. In our lives.”

Sherlock is still for a moment, blinking slowly as his finger pauses on the curve of John’s ear. “You keep saying ‘she.’”

“Hm? Oh. She or he, I suppose.”

“But you default to ‘she.’”

“Christ, Sherlock, that’s what you’re fixating on?” John stands and paces the length of the living room. Sherlock watches him like a well-timed experiment.

“John, do you want children?”

John stops and inhales sharply, his breath quick and shallow, giving Sherlock all the answer he needs.

“Well, this baby might be the closest I get to it. Though, Harry did offer to return the favor, if you know…”

“If what?”

“If… well, nevermind.” John shakes his head and gives that humorless chuckle that he makes when he’s berating himself for something colossally stupid.

“If you and I were to want children?”

“Look – that’s not – that’s not what I’m asking or bringing up right now. We’ve been dating for, well, not that long and that’s a discussion for another time.”

“So this current crisis of conscience is about whether or not – ”

“I should father my sister’s baby,” John finishes and promptly makes a face as Sherlock snorts.

“Well, when you put it like that…” he trails off and holds his hand out, beckoning John to him to ease the blow of his teasing.

“Would you be okay with that?” John asks as he sinks down next to Sherlock on the couch once more.

“Would you be okay with that,” he replies, gently rubbing his thumb over John’s wrist, feeling the thump of his beating heart.

And when John finally glances up, his smile is incandescent.

“Yeah… I think I would be.”

“I know about the return offer,” Irene’s voice cuts through the haze of memory and Sherlock starts.

“What?”

“The offer for Harry to donate an egg should you and John ever choose to procreate. I know about that.”
“How?” Sherlock asks and Irene gives a little shrug.

“How? John tells me things.”

He’s quiet for a moment, because truthfully, it is something he’s thought about and something he continues to think about every time Lu visits or Facetimes, or sends them a drawing accompanied by a poorly-spelled yet absolutely adorable note.

But that perfect little domestic life raft they’ve created is rapidly taking on water for the first time since they properly got together. And Sherlock doesn’t know how to fix it.

Or how to swim without John.

“When haven’t you married him?” Irene asks abruptly, and he’s pretty sure he just snorted soda through his nose, an entirely unpleasant experience.

“Excuse me?” he chokes.

Irene seems to take great delight in his discomfort. “Why haven’t you and John gotten married?”

Sherlock flounders for a moment and, not for the first time, regrets ever calling her to brunch.

“We’ve been…”

What? Happy? Busy?

Scared?

For once, he has no idea how to finish that sentence and the question, one of very few, remains unanswered.

xxxxxx

John bounces on his toes amid the throngs of Paddington Station, craning his neck to see if he can catch sight of Harry and/or Clara amid those coming and going from their weekend plans.

Clearly, though, he was looking for the wrong height:

“Uncle John!” he hears and he turns just in time for Lu to barrel into his legs, wrapping her short arms around his knees and hugging fiercely.

“Lu, my love!” he greets, swinging her up onto his hip and pressing a kiss to each cheek. “How’s my girl? Been well?”

Lucy Watson-Collins giggles and nods and John only tears his eyes away when he feels a hand at his back.

“Hey kiddo,” Harry warmly greets, pressing a kiss to his cheek before stepping back and allowing Clara to do the same.

“How was the flight? Uneventful?”

“Give me an Ambien and a glass of wine and I am good to go,” Clara replies, but it’s still early in the morning New York time. They both look a bit crushed. Only Lu is brimming with energy as she eyes the tiny Paddington Bear that’s sticking out of John’s bag.

“Is that for me?” she whispers and John leans in close.
“Could be. Why don’t you pull him out and see.” And sure enough, she tugs on the tiny bear to find a note on his tag saying, “Dear Lucy, Please look after this bear,” which elicits a gasp of delight.

“You spoil her,” Harry teases as she pushes her daughter’s dirty blonde hair from her face. “That makes, what, five Paddingtons she has now?”

“Six!” Lu replies and John huffs.

“Hey now. They all have different raincoats and hats. Don’t they, love?” he asks and Lu nods before rattling off which ones have yellow and blue and red as they make their way out of the station, towards the Circle Line and Baker Street.

xxxxxx

Much as Harry predicted, it takes Lu all of an hour to crash and crash hard.

Which is how they find themselves slowly walking the short trip from the hotel to the flat at Baker Street, with Lu passed out on John’s shoulder, while the adults talk in hushed tones.

They stop into Speedy’s so Clara and Harry can grab some coffee, while John, being the good uncle he is, remains outside so the lunchtime crowds don’t wake the napping four-year-old.

“He looks a bit weary,” Clara murmurs as they wait for their beverages and Harry nods as she watches her brother through the window.

“He does.”

“Worse than Macbeth.”

Harry gives a small shrug. “He is a bit older.”

“That’s not age,” Clara quietly replies and Harry can’t help but agree. She read the play – John knew it would be rough going in, but this is that and then some. And then it hits her how odd it is that Sherlock didn’t join John at the station. A glaring fact that neither she nor Clara has commented on because frankly, it’s just easier to ignore.

It wouldn’t be the first time Sherlock had ducked out to finish an experiment or practice a new monologue or even pretend to swordfight with the stag in the living room, but what was most telling, what made John so transparent, was how Sherlock was noticeably absent from the conversation entirely.

“They’re all right, yeah?” Clara asks while they’re still in the safety of the café and Harry inhales sharply.

“God I hope so.”

They exit into the brisk London air once more to find that Lu has not moved a muscle, though she managed to drool a bit on John’s shoulder.

“Sorry about that,” Clara laughs as she uses her napkin and dabs at her daughter’s lips.

“Hazard of the job, I suppose,” John replies, using one hand to dig in his pocket for the key.

“Is Sherlock in?” Harry ventures to ask and John must be more tired than she thought if his sudden tension is so obvious. Normally, he’s a better actor than that. He does get paid for it, after all.
“He had a business lunch with Irene. Shouldn’t be long. And I suspect she’ll join him here when she finds out you lot have arrived.”

“Oh God, my liver hasn’t recovered from the last time we went out with Irene,” Clara moans and Harry winks.

“I’ll share mine with you.”

Clara leans in to peck her on the lips as John carries Lu up to the spare room. She decides to make herself useful and at least set the kettle to boiling, since she just downed her coffee and is in desperate need of a cuppa. And when John returns a moment later, he joins her in getting out the mugs and tea, working in tandem like the well-oiled machine they are.

The tension in the room is thick with all that’s being left unsaid though, and eventually, John makes a pathetic attempt at an excuse and disappears to the bedroom. Clara sends Harry a look that seems to say ‘Well? Get in there,’ as she goes to cut up some apple slices for Lu when she wakes.

Harry huffs, but she’s old hat at this by now – at dealing with John when he’s emotionally constipated. Which is often.

She tiptoes down the hall to the room he shares with Sherlock and watches John attempt to fold a shirt, just so his hands have something to do.

“Johnny.”

“Harry, don’t. Just – ” he bows his head and sighs. “I know what you’re going to say and please just… don’t.”

So she doesn’t – merely strides two steps and hugs him from behind, resting her cheek against his shoulder blade.

“How bad is it?” she quietly asks.

“I don’t know,” he replies.

“I’m sorry,” she says after a moment, breath hot against his shirt.

“Me too,” he whispers, patting her arm.

“Just don’t be an idiot. That goes for both of you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He attempts to pull away but she holds him tighter, hands clasped around her wrists, which remain snug against his chest.

“John, I mean it. You’re each the best thing that’s happened to the other. Don’t fuck it up.”

He lifts her hand and places a kiss on the back of it, and she reaches up and swats him none-too-gently upside the head.

He might be a stubborn arse, but she can never stay frustrated with him. Not when he shares her daughter’s eyes.

xxxxxx

Sherlock fortifies himself for a moment, even though the February chill is nipping at his face as he stares at the gold lettering stark against the black door: 221B.
“Hurry it up, then,” Irene complains. “I’m freezing my bollocks off out here.”

Sherlock smirks, because Irene is nothing if not classy, and opens the door, already straining to hear the sounds of laughter floating down from the flat. He is not disappointed.

“Uncle John, no!” Lu squeals and Sherlock can’t help the little flip his stomach does.

He has missed her. Ever since he and John moved back to London and Harry and Clara stayed in New York. They still split their time, but London has taken precedence, which means more phone calls instead of in-person play dates.

Lucy used to love their in-person play dates.

Sherlock swallows and tempers his excitement, climbing the stairs and watching from the doorway for a moment as John swings Lu over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. The girl giggles uncontrollably, face red, blonde hair coming loose from her braid as she scrabbles for purchase on John’s jumper.

And then she catches sight of him. “Uncle Sherlock!”

Three heads turn in his direction, but he only has eyes for her as she wiggles hard enough for John to place her on the ground lest he drop her. She manages one stride before she launches herself into Sherlock’s arms and he raises her high while still being mindful of the ceiling.

“Look how you’ve grown!” he says as he holds her up so they’re face to face. He narrows his eyes and she mimics him. “What’s 3x4?”

“12.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Really, Sherlock? Multiplication at four?” Irene drawls and Sherlock mocks an innocent expression.

“Never too young to start.”

“Auntie Irene!” Lu yells next, wiggling until Sherlock deposits her in the agent’s waiting arms.

“Hello, love. You been good?” Irene asks and Lu nods emphatically.

“Yes.”

“Sometimes,” Harry amends from the couch before standing and glaring at Sherlock. “Well come on, you daft git. Where’s my hug?”

He smiles at the warmth in her eyes and pulls her in close. He has always loved Harriet Watson – mostly because she never automatically takes John’s side when he and Sherlock have an argument. She’s a good referee. An unbiased middleman, mostly because he assumes she knows how much they care for one another. And today is no different. He had truly worried that she’d be affected by whatever John had told her, but her hug is fierce and her kiss on his cheek warm as she ruffles his hair.

“Me next,” Clara says when Harry moves away to greet Irene.

Sherlock pulls her in with an equally warm hug. “Hello, Clara.”

“My Lady M,” she cheekily replies.
All that’s left is John. John, who is looking at him like he’s the most exquisite and most terrifying thing he’s ever laid eyes on. Sherlock moves in to greet him, but all John manages is an awkward kiss on the cheek.

Air raid sirens go off in Sherlock’s head, but he manages a tight smile all the same.

“Kettle’s just boiled,” John murmurs, hand brushing Sherlock’s lower back. Sherlock stiffens and John immediately drops his arm.

Shit.

“Thank you,” he manages, never needing such pleasantries with John. He usually grunts something unintelligible and John replies with a snarky yet loving “You’re welcome, you berk,” and then Sherlock tilts his head up for a kiss and John bends down to oblige. That’s the way it’s supposed to be.

Clara halts his inner monologue as she hands him a cup with a wink. He smiles his thanks and moves to perch on the edge of the table, responding at all the appropriate times as Irene asks about their flight, how New York is, etc.

Lu finds her way back over to John and climbs up on his lap and Sherlock sharply inhales as he gets a good look at them side by side for the first time in months. She looks just like him and Sherlock can’t help but feel a sense of echoing emptiness in his chest at the sight.

John is good with children. Great with them, in fact. Sherlock doesn’t know if that is something John wants and what startles him even more is that it’s taken him six years to even ponder the topic. Sure, it was brought up when Lu became a possibility, but it was swept under the rug, along with a lot of other questions Sherlock should ask John, apparently.

Sherlock has found himself becoming more introspective these days. Such is the nature of Larry Kramer’s work, he supposes. And as he glances at Harry and Clara and the daughter they share, he wonders if he isn’t missing out on something that’s clearly been fought tooth and nail for.

“What’s the plan for tonight?” Harry asks, glancing between John and Sherlock. The men share a brief look and John shifts forward.

“Well, curtain is at 7:30pm. We should end around ten, so if your jet lag isn’t too bad, come on down and meet us for a post-show bite. Mrs. Hudson already offered to watch Lu. Greg and Molly will be there.”

“Excellent! We’ll head back to the hotel for a nap when you leave for the theatre.” Clara smiles as Harry looks at her watch.

“Speaking of, shouldn’t you get going?”

Sherlock glances at the clock on the wall: 5:03pm. They haven’t opened yet, but they’re close enough that rehearsals have been few and far between. They just need to be there by half-hour at 7pm. Given the play, though, pre-show prep is key.

“Shall we?” Sherlock asks John as he stands and stretches, but John stares at his shoes – the first sign that he’s lying.

“I actually have a quick errand to run. Meet you there?”

Sherlock nods and watches quietly as John bids everyone goodbye and heads out the door.
He resolutely ignores the heavy weight of the three gazes that follow him about the room as he gathers his things.

“Lucy Watson-Collins!” he calls and Lu jumps to attention, giving a perfect salute that John taught her last time they visited. “Man the fort while I’m gone.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” she responds and Sherlock winks, throwing a wave over his shoulder as he makes his escape.

And when he hits the street, he inhales deeply and desperately, wondering how such an open space can become so damn claustrophobic.

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John doesn’t have an errand to run. He just needs to fortify himself before that evening’s performance, both emotionally and physically. His lines are already taunting him like a vengeful ghost as he walks down Shaftesbury Avenue:

“If I had it, would you leave me?”

As Ned, he asks that question every night as he sits on the floor with Sherlock playing Felix. And the subtle emotions that run across Sherlock’s face as he tries to answer nearly level John every time.

“I don’t know. Would you, if I did?”

“No.” His reply is firm. Indisputable.

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

He’s usually pretty good at tuning out an audience, but the collective gasp that rises when Sherlock pulls his sock off to show John the large purple spot on his foot guts him every time.

“It keeps getting bigger and bigger, Neddie, and it doesn’t go away.”

That’s the scene that ends Act One and John spends intermission attempting to collect himself enough just to start Act Two. Ned and Felix are so like John and Sherlock. The calm and the storm. The fire and the ice. They could switch roles and it would probably still work. After all, each has a bit of the other in them.

“You take care of the city – I’ll take care of Felix.”

“I’m afraid to be with him; I’m afraid to be without him; I’m afraid the cure won’t come in time; I’m afraid of my anger; I’m a terrible leader and a useless lover.”

John shakes his head and yanks the stage door open as he stalks to his dressing room. He shouldn’t be surprised to find Sherlock waiting for him, but he is. Standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, head bowed, not even bothering to look up when John enters.

“And how was your errand?”

What hurts most is that there’s no bite or accusation in the question. It’s just a simple and soft query, though they both know the answer.

“Sherlock…”
“Look, I know I’m not the most astute when it comes to relationships, but let’s have it out. Because whatever this is, it’s got to stop.” He stands straight and his arms fall to his sides. “I can’t do this play without you and you’re drifting further and further away from me. I need to make that stop. You have to tell how to make it stop.”

John swallows hard, hating the fact that his eyes are already burning.

“If the play is taking its toll, that’s one thing,” Sherlock continues. “That’s something I can handle, even if you aren’t handling it very well.”

Indignation blooms hot and heavy in John’s chest. “Wait just a minute – ”

“I know it’s hard, John! But this is what we signed up for! And if this is what’s going to happen, then maybe this should be the last play we do together.”

“Sherlock – ” Too many things are happening. John can barely breathe.

“But if you don’t want this anymore,” Sherlock gestures to the space between them, “then you need to tell me.”

“Of course I want this,” John replies, frustration giving way to growing horror. Of course he wants Sherlock. Always.

“Why aren’t we married?” Sherlock abruptly asks and John’s jaw snaps shut, the rebuttal he had at the ready flying away at the unexpected question.

“Because you don’t want to get married,” he states in the matter-of-fact tone one would use if they were announcing that the sky was blue.

Sherlock’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “And why would you make that assumption?”

John barks out a laugh and spits, “I believe your exact words were: ‘Why would anyone want to get married? What a pointless institution.’ You’re all about the work.”

“So are you!” Sherlock retorts hotly and John’s anger spikes.

“But you come first!”

Sherlock reels back as if slapped. “You think I don’t put you first?”

“No, just… forget I said that.” Fuck.

“Not likely,” Sherlock practically growls. “I said I thought marriage was pointless because I didn’t think you wanted it!”

“Well, I do!”

Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut and holds his hands up. “Wait – are we fighting about marriage or about the play?”

“Both!” John yells as Sherlock bellows, “I’m confused!”

“Well there’s a first time for everything!” is John’s biting reply and only then do they seem to recognize the ridiculousness of the situation, standing in the middle of the dressing room panting in the silence.
A hesitant knock comes at the door and Nate pokes his head in a moment later. “That’s half hour, gentlemen.”

John nods and murmurs, “Ta, Nate,” but his eyes never leave Sherlock’s. He hears the sound of the door close a moment later and takes a step forward. He needs to make this right.

“I’m sorry. Jesus, I am. I’m putting too much of myself in Ned and I can’t separate the fact.”

“I can tell. The way Ned looks at Felix is pure you,” Sherlock softly murmurs.

John can’t help but smile. “You have that affect on me. But we’re also… we just – ” he groans at his inability to speak and the words tumble forth in a rush: “We’re playing men in a time who didn’t have the luxuries we’ve been given today and I feel like we’re squandering it or something. Wait – let me finish,” he says when Sherlock opens his mouth to interrupt. “I just – if you get sick or hurt, yes, there are liberties I am afforded if I am your husband. And, no, I don’t want to marry you just to get access to your hospital room. Though it’s a perk,” he manages with a small smile.

Sherlock’s eyes soften and that gives him the courage to continue. He stands up straight and squares his shoulders, because what he’s going to say next has been weighing on his mind for quite some time and if he misses this moment of opportunity, he won’t ever get it back again. He might not ever get the man he loves back again either.

“Sherlock, you die in my arms every night and I know it’s not real, but those emotions? They are.” John inhales shakily, blinking against the prickle of tears at the corners of his eyes. “And every time that curtain comes down, I feel like I’ve left a piece of myself on that stage. A piece that I don’t think I’ll ever get back. I know that’s not your fault. I know it is. But because of what I have with you, because of what I feel for you, this play is affecting me more than anything else I’ve ever done and I can’t – I don’t know how – ” he huffs out a sound that could be a sob and Sherlock is across the room and wrapping his arms around him so tightly, John can’t breathe.

“Together,” he whispers fiercely. “We do it together.”

He lets the tears come, burning hot and heavy at the corner of his eyes, staining the fabric of Sherlock’s shirt. Every emotion he’s bottled up over the past few weeks spills forth, pulling sobs and whimpers from his throat as he twists Sherlock’s collar around his fingers.

“That’s it,” Sherlock whispers, voice tight as he rocks them in a gentle motion. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. Not ever.” Sherlock presses a kiss into John’s hair. “Just stop pushing me away. Please.”

John nods and releases Sherlock’s shirt to get his arms around his waist, holding fast once more. Sherlock breathes steadily against his temple.

“You once said to me, when I was being a colossal arse: ‘I am always by your side.’ Do you remember?”

And John does. Six years ago, when Sherlock disappeared because he thought leaving John was sparing John. How the tables have turned, he thinks as he nods.

“Well, I am always by yours. Let me be there.”
John turns his head and presses his nose against Sherlock’s collarbone, inhaling the familiar scent of pine, shampoo, and laundry detergent.

“I love you,” he murmurs, feeling Sherlock’s lips press against his hairline once more.

“I love you too. Now come,” he pulls away and cups John’s face in his hands, “it’s odd for me to be the voice of reason. I’d prefer we go back to you being the romantic and me being the ignorant twat.”

John snorts and kisses Sherlock’s palm. “Deal. Though, for the record, you are a romantic.”

“Don’t let anyone know,” he smirks. “England would fall.”

The performance that night is something else. Otherworldly.

And when they get to the end, Sherlock keeps himself just distant enough to remember it. To not get immersed in the action, but rather to savor it.

Sherlock as Felix smiles weakly from his place in the hospital bed, finger tracing John’s knuckles where their hands are clasped together.

“Don’t lose that anger. Just have a little more patience and forgiveness. For yourself as well.”

John as Ned smiles, even as the tears roll down his face. “What am I ever going to do without you?”

“Finish writing something. Okay?” Sherlock squeezes his fingers and John nods.

“Okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay. It better be good.”

Adam, the actor playing Ned’s estranged brother Ben, enters and surveys the scene.

“Hello, Ben,” Sherlock says, always taking great delight in John’s look of shock. Ned and his brother are meant to have not seen each other in quite some time.

“Hello, Felix,” Adam smiles.

Before John can voice his confusion, Alex who plays the doctor Emma, wheels in.

“Emma, could we start please?” Sherlock asks and Alex smiles warmly, if sadly.

“We are gathered here in the sight of God to join together these two men. They love each other very much and want to be married in the presence of their family before Felix dies. I can see no objection. This is my hospital, my church,” she states firmly as members of the audience applaud.

“Do you, Felix Turner, take Ned Weeks –”

“Alexander,” Sherlock interrupts and John laughs through a sob.

“… to be your –”
“My lover,” Sherlock replies with more feeling and emotion than he’s ever expressed, because John needs to know this. He needs to understand that this is Sherlock, now. Not Felix. “My lover, I do.”

And John must get it because when he replies, “I do,” Sherlock has a beautiful moment to register the fierce determination in John’s features before he closes his eyes and dies.

And as John presses his face to Sherlock’s neck and sobs like he’s never done before, Sherlock realizes then that it’s not about the play. It never was. It’s about the emotions and the longing and the sheer terror that comes with loving someone as much as he loves John. As much as John loves him.

Fighting about the play and fighting about marriage aren’t separate battles. They’re one and the same. They’re fighting for it.

And finally Sherlock, in all his infinite wisdom, understands.

xxxxxx

When John makes it back to his dressing room after the show that night, when it feels like his chest is about to crumble under the strain of all he’s holding in, Sherlock is waiting for him just as John opens the door. He wordlessly holds his arms out and John collapses into them once more.

“Sherlock –”

“Marry me,” Sherlock finishes and John's jaw drops.

“I was going to ask –”

“Me to marry you. Yes.”

John blinks owlishly. “You’re saying ‘yes?’ But you asked me.”

“Yes, I’m saying ‘yes’ for both of us. Keep up, John.”

“You ridiculous man,” John manages before he’s grabbing Sherlock’s lapels and crashing their lips together.

They will do this every night for the entirety of the run, minus the marriage proposal. John will stumble offstage and Sherlock will be waiting for him, ready to accept whatever emotional energy John needs to expend. It will be their ritual. Their routine.

It’ll get easier, John knows it will. But for now, he cannot voice how grateful he is for the love of the man at his side.

His lover.

His partner.

His fiancé.

xxxxxx

They win Olivier Awards on a Sunday evening in April and exchange rings the following Tuesday. It’s a small affair at the City Clerk’s office, but Mrs. Hudson sobs through it as if it had been held at St. Paul’s all the same.

Irene makes them throw a proper party in New York a week after their limited London run ends in
August. The entire cast and crew of *Macbeth* are in attendance. Sean makes a speech. Everyone cries. Sherlock huffs, “sentiment,” and John kisses his cheek.

The show moves to Broadway in January and that June they add two more Tonys to the mantle. John makes a joke about needing more space. Sherlock buys him a flat on the Upper West Side that makes Baker Street look like a studio.

The call from the doctor comes on a Wednesday morning over eggs and toast. The surrogate implant was successful. They’re going to be fathers. John only has one panic attack, while Sherlock channels his into baby proofing the entirety of Baker Street. John steps on no less than five plastic outlet covers. Mrs. Hudson cries again.

Eight months, three weeks, four days, and eighteen hours later, William Henry Watson-Holmes is born at 4:08 on a rainy Saturday morning. John laughs through sobs as his son is placed in his arms, while Sherlock stares as if he’s never seen anything so perfect or so perfectly complex in all his life. He saves his tears for later, when they’re both tucked in bed with Liam softly snoring between them.

He is dressed in a gift from Molly, a Bumblebee onesie that reads, “To bee or not to bee.”

That is, after all, the question.

~ fin ~

**Chapter End Notes**

- There is a restaurant on the fifth floor of Harvey Nichols in London. It's yum, though I haven't been in ages.
- The Normal Heart is an autobiographical play written by activist Larry Kramer. The character of Ned Weeks is based off of his experiences in New York in the early '80s and founding the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. It is beautiful and necessary and devastating. It was on Broadway in 2011 starring Joe Mantello, John Benjamin Hickey, Ellen Barkin, Lee Pace, and Jim Parsons. Lee Pace had to help me fix my mascara post-show. I was a disaster.
- The Park Plaza Hotel is just down the street at 108 Baker. Hilariously, it's called the Sherlock Holmes Park Plaza. No, I have never stayed there.
- In my mind, the actress playing Emma the doctor in their production of *The Normal Heart* is Alex Kingston. The actor playing Ben is Adam James.

**Works inspired by this** [PDFIC] To the Sticking Place by Lockedinjohnlock (Podfixx)

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